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THE BUSINESS, TECHNOLOGY & ART OF ANIMATION

ANIMATIONTM MAGAZINE




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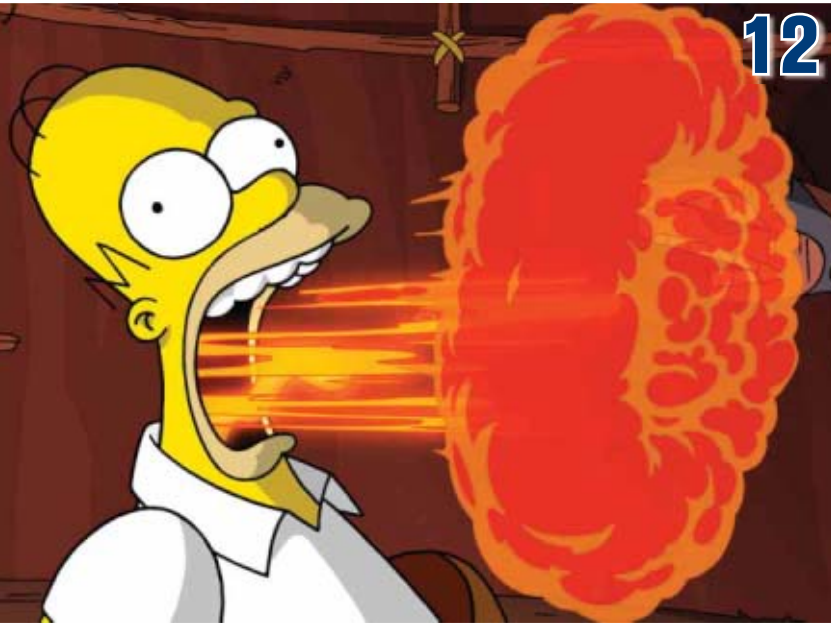
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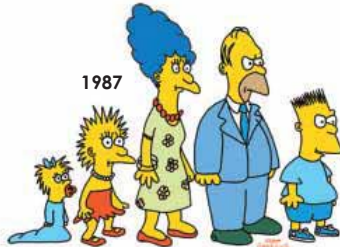
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On the Cover: Fox's long-awaited *The Simpsons Movie* finally hits the big screen. The Simpsons™ and © 2007 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. All Rights Reserved.
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Many months ago, I put a huge alert mark on the July 29, 2007 date on my calendar marking the release of Fox's *The Simpsons Movie* as soon as the studio made the big announcement. I guess that makes me a genuine Simpsons geek, but I know I'm not alone when I profess my huge admiration and respect for Matt Groening and his brilliant, funny and hugely influential creations.

Those of us who were lucky enough to live in Los Angeles in the 80s recall Groening's hilarious comic strip *Life in Hell*, which originated in the local alternative newspaper *L.A. Reader*. The strip has been anthologized in a series of books and is carried in 250 weeklies today. Then in 1987, we watched as Groening's inspired interstitial series for *The Tracey Ullman Show* took a life of its own and became one of the biggest pop cultural phenoms and the most durable sitcom in the history of television. After more than 400 episodes and 18 seasons, Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie and the rest of the twisted residents of Springfield will live forever in our collective pop culture memory, no matter what happens to the franchise in the years ahead.



In a recent insightful *L.A. Weekly* cover story, Groening pointed out, "If I got hit by a truck tomorrow, *The Simpsons* would continue on indefinitely. There doesn't seem to be any end in sight. And sometimes, you know, I go, 'Is my work

redundant? Am I just doing the same thing again and again and again?' But I feel like every week I learn something new — I learn something about writing, I learn something about other people, I learn about storytelling, I learn new jokes. And it's entertainment, for me. I get to be on the scene where these brilliant people are



making this amazing show, and, *Oh, yeah — I created it!* That is to say, I got the ball rolling, and now it's a snowball that keeps on picking up speed. It's really fun! And . . . it's not very charming to be having such a good time."

Hey, we still think it's pretty darn charming. In fact, we don't give a rat's ass whether the movie will set new box-office records or send a message to all of its CG-animated competition. (Make sure you check out Michael Mallory's excellent cover story about all the blood, sweat and tears that went into the making of the movie.) We're just thrilled that the bright yellow-skinned gang will make their big-screen debut. And they're doing it, the old-fashioned way—traditionally animated and proud of it. And if anyone dares to suggest that the show has past its prime, all of us die-hard Simpsonites have a three-word message for them: *Eat Our Shorts!*

Ramin

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Quote of the Month

"You have to pick your battles. I had to give up a lot of things that would make me weep, not because they need to be in the film but because I wanted to see them animated. But Lois Lane and Wonder Woman had to stay in."



—Writer/artist Darwyn Cooke whose comic book *Justice League: The New Frontier* has been made into a Warner Bros. direct-to-DVD movie, due out in February.

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The Animation Planner

September

3 It's time to put on your best manga outfits and head over to Sin City for the annual **Anime Vegas Convention** (www.animevegas.com).

Telluride Film Festival continues to draw die-hard cinema lovers to the mountainside community (www.telluridefilmfestival.org).

3-7 You can get your French TV toons on at the **13th Annual Rendez-Vous** market in Biarritz, France this week (www.tvfrance-intl.com).



4 Summer is almost over, but we've got new DVDs to cheer us up! We're talking about **SpongeBob SquarePants: Season 5, Vol. 1**; **She-Ra Princess of Power: Season 2**; **Robot Chicken: Season 2**; and **InuYasha: The Complete Movies Box Set**.

7-9 German anime and manga fans will celebrate the art form at the annual **Connichi** festival in Stadthalle (www.connichi.de). Meanwhile in Hollywood, Calif., festivalgoers can enjoy a variety of animated and live-action projects at the **Moondance Intl. Film Festival** held at Universal Studios' City Walk (www.moondancefilmfestival.com).

11 Resistance is futile: You will find yourself drawn to the nearest Best Buy to plunk down your hard-earned money for **Avatar: Complete Book 2**, **Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends: Season 2** and **Tom and Jerry: Spotlight Collection 3** DVDs today.

16 If you're ready for an Italian getaway, we suggest checking out the 6th edition of the **Magma International Short Film Festival** (www.magmafestival.org).

17 The **Toronto Online Film Awards** are held today. No need to dress up, as everything is done online at <http://toff.ca>.

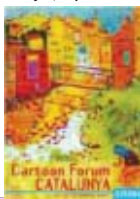


18 Is it really fair to have all these great toon DVDs released on the same day? Come on—how much can we really take when **Family Guy: Vol. 5**, **The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy: Complete Season 1**, **Superman: Doomsday** and **Josie and the Pussycats: The Complete Series** all hit the stores simultaneously!



Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends

19-22 Find out what the Euro TV toon community is up to at the beautifully organized **Cartoon Forum** event, which is held in Catalunya, Spain this year (www.cartoon-media.be).



19-23 The fall season officially kicks off with the wonderful **Ottawa Intl. Animation Festival** and its sterling collection of cutting-edge gems and business panels (www.ottawa.awn.com).



20-22 **Animanima Intl. Animation Festival** brings the toon action to Cacak, Serbia (www.animanima.org).



Resident Evil: Extinction

21 Milla Jovovich is in top zombie/mutant-fighting form in the new sequel **Resident Evil: Extinction**, directed by Russell Mulcahy and co-starring Ali Larter from NBC's *Heroes*.

22-25 We'll take any event that's set in Vancouver: This one—the **Vancouver Intl. Digital Festival**—may actually help your career (www.vidfest.com).



25 Warner Bros. Animation is having a blast as it releases new direct-to-DVD project featuring classic characters simultaneously: **Tweety's High-Flying Adventure**.



28 Look for some cool visuals courtesy of Eden FX in Julie Taymor's much-anticipated '60s period pic, **Across the Universe**.



Sep. 28-Oct. 7 Get with the Asian program at the **Taiwan International Animation Festival** in Taipei City (<http://tiaf.ctfa.org.tw>).

To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please e-mail cwebb@animationmagazine.net

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Books We Love: Summer Reading: Part 2

There are no summer dulldrums for animation-related book aficionados this month. Since we had such an overabundance of toonelicious reads in August, we decided to devote a second column to must-reads of the season:

Secrets of Oscar-winning Animation

By Olivier Cotte (Focal Press, \$34.95)

In the last three decades, we've seen the emergence of indie animators such as Frederic Back (*The Man Who Planted Trees*, 1987), Daniel Greaves (*Manipulation*, 1991) and Adam Elliot (*Harvie Krumpet*, 2003) who have received well-deserved Oscar nods from the voting branch of the Academy. Olivier Cotte's excellent new book, *Secrets of Oscar-winning Animation*, offers a chance to revisit 13 of these eclectic Oscar-winning shorts, through in-depth interviews and behind-the-scenes notes about the making of each mini masterpiece. It's nice to see Michael Dudok de Wit's *Father and Daughter*, Joan C. Gratz's *Mona Lisa Descending a Staircase* and Alexander Petrov's *The Old Man and the Sea* get their moments in the sun as well as Back, Greaves and Elliot. Interestingly enough, Cotte does such a great job that we kind of wish he had compiled a whole series of books about each and every animated short favored by old man Oscar. The book would work better as a reference if the publishers had included a comprehensive list of all the winners and nominees of the past 75 years as well.



The Art of RoboTech: The Shadow Chronicles

By Tommy Yune (Stone Bridge Press, \$19.95)

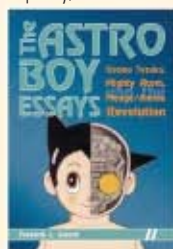
In his forward to the new art book devoted to the recent *Robotech: The Shadow Chronicles* movie, director/producer Carl Macek discusses why he suspected many years ago that the Japanese toon would be such a breakout hit in the U.S. The ground breaking series has inspired director Tommy Yune to prepare a visually arresting collection of concept art, plot guides and in-depth character, mecha and vessel profiles, vessel statistics and production commentaries that would make any Robotech-fan feel like the brainiac captain of a spaceship. Packed in the glossy 140-plus pages of this collection are numerous images and insightful essays on the evolution of the show and the anime world over the past three decades. Plus, for all of us who need a refresher course, the book includes a glossary of terms, so that we all know our invids (a protoplasmic alien race) from our zarayba (that's an alien drink that is something of an acquired taste!).



The Astro Boy Essays: Osamu Tezuka, Mighty Atom and the Manga/Anime Revolution

By Frederik L. Schodt (Stone Bridge Press, \$16.95)

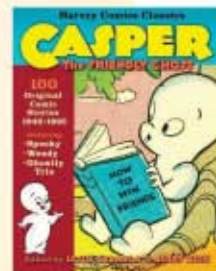
Osamu Tezuka's Mighty Atom or Astro Boy character has been the leading icon of anime's popularity in the western world. First introduced as manga in 1951, the little boy robot has inspired various animated incarnations and will star in his own CG-animated feature, produced by Imagi in 2009. We're lucky to have Frederik L. Schodt, a long-time American friend and translator guide us to the world of Tezuka and his creation in a charming volume titled *The Astro Boy Essays*. An excellent tie-in to the current San Francisco Asian Art Museum's "Tezuka: The Marvel of Manga" exhibit (which closes Sept. 9), Schodt's essays take us through the exquisite, beautifully crafted world of Astro and reveal the people, events and beliefs that shaped the Japanese master's world. You'll also get to have an excellent index of all the episodes of the original TV-animation series (1963-65) and their airdates in the U.S., as well as a guide to related publications. If you don't feel a deep yearning for this companion book, check your wires: Your system may be on overload.



Harvey Comics Classics Vol. 1: Casper

By Leslie Cabarga and Jerry Beck (Dark Horse, \$19.95)

Years before he was a CG-animated character hanging out with Christina Ricci in his own feature, Casper the Friendly Ghost was the gentle star of a series of animated Paramount shorts, beginning in 1945. Along with Richie Rich, Wendy the Good Witch and Baby Huey, he was one of the big stars of Harvey Comics. This summer the crackerjack team of toon expert Jerry Beck and award-winning designer Leslie Cabarga have put together a collection of the original comic-book adventures harking back to 1949, when Harvey gave new life to the little transparent guy. No, Casper never quite got the hang of being a mean old ghost, like his buddy Spooky or his uncles the Ghostly Trio (Fatso, Fusso and Lazo). In fact, his softness would make him an easy target in today's mean animation universe. Although we still haven't seen an actual copy of the book, we have a feeling this 480-page paperback is going to warm our hearts all year—or at least until October when Vol. 2, featuring that junior capitalist Richie Rich, hits the stores!



—Ramin Zahed



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Crate and Barrel

Warner Bros. Interactive Unloads *Looney Tunes: Acme Arsenal*. by Ryan Ball

Like Wile E. Coyote's ever-present Acme crates, you never know what's going to come out of the Looney Tunes franchise, and the latest video game from Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment and developer Red Tribe is prime proof of that. For *Looney Tunes: Acme Arsenal*, the classic cartoon property has been given a bit of an overhaul for the latest generation of game consoles. Boasting seven playable characters and more than 20 unique weapons that run the gamut from zany rocket launchers to boxing glove guns, the title promises to give gamers a real sock in the ol' kisser.

Acme Arsenal offers one- or two-player cooperative gameplay that includes fast-paced combat, puzzle-solving challenges and vehicle-based action over a variety of environments including Camelot, Ancient Egypt, Mars, the Wild West and the trenches of World War II. The Microsoft Xbox Live online network allows for two-player cooperative game play and the Nintendo Wii version lets players use gesture controls in fighting, spin attacks, smash attacks and driving.

Game producer Nick Torchia of Warner Bros. Interactive tells us that during pre-production he and his team called on Warner Bros. Animation for help with re-tooling the Looney Tunes cast of crit-

ters. "Our primary goal was to come up with something a bit more up-to-date without losing the personalities of these classic characters," he says. "They have more of a serious look to them and the color scheme was also changed—they are a bit more saturated. WB Animation used rim lighting to make them look more 3D rather than 2D."

Torchia notes that the new consoles allow for such a large number of bones and joints in character animation that the possibilities are nearly infinite. Since facial animation has the potential to be so much more expressive, straddling the line between finessed performances and cartoonish acting turned out to be one of the biggest challenges for the animators.

Looney Tunes: Acme Arsenal boasts real-time physics and animation blending, which Torchia says allows for silky smooth animations that were virtually impossible to achieve on previous consoles. "The characters can pop with very detailed looks and more natural movement," he states.

One character that posed a fun challenge for the crew was Marvin the Martian, who required approximately four months of prototyping because he's such an unusual character. "Since our game relies heavily on weapon combat,



we have a deep melee combat system and he is known mainly for space guns," Torchia explains. "So we came up with the idea of Greco-Roman swords since he is based on Greek history, and we gave him two swords, making him the only character in the game with two melee weapons in his hands. Funny thing is that he was inspired by Yoda from *Star Wars: Episode II: Attack of the Clones*."

To create the game's cinematics, Red Tribe worked with Zero One Animation in Australia, which created rendered in-game assets that blend with the gameplay to provide a virtually seamless environment where cut-scenes don't slow down the action. The sequences are designed to play like mini cartoons and even feature sound work by some of the foley artists who worked on the feature films *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* and *Looney Tunes Back in Action* for Warner Bros. Animation.

Development of the game was already underway before the innovative Wii controller was announced, and Torchia admits being thrown for a curve at first as he wondered how the fast-paced weapon and melee gameplay would work with what he thought was a TV remote. "After we got the controller and started messing around with it, there was no real challenge," he recalls. "Melee attacks are mapped to the wand, so you move your hands to actually hit the enemies and to move the player. It's a pretty simple and fun system to work with. The only trick is balancing the Wii remote and using all sorts of possible button combinations."

If we've learned anything from watching Warner Bros. cartoons all our lives, it's that weaponry from the Acme company tends to backfire on the user, especially when the instructions are haphazardly discarded. **Just something to keep in mind as you wait for the game to hit stores for Microsoft's Xbox 360, Nintendo's Wii and Sony's PlayStation 2 on Sept. 18.** ■

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E3 Loses the Spectacle, Keeps its Game Face

by Ryan Ball

Attending this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in Santa Monica, Calif. was a bit like visiting a trust-fund kid who has suddenly decided that he's had enough of wild parties, loud music and bikini-clad women sauntering around the pool. The flashy, expensive display booths have been replaced by comfortably appointed hotel suites, bungalows, tents and even an airplane hangar where members of the press could check out upcoming games without having to wade through massive crowds or shout questions over the sounds or WWII coming from the next booth.

The whole affair (July 11-13) was a bit spread out over a few different hotels that weren't all within reasonable walking distance of one another, but attendees got to see more games at each location than they would have if there were long lines to contend with. Plus, efficient press access assured that there was a steady stream of news hitting the web to cover anything that might have been missed. As reported on our own site (www.animationmagazine.net), Sony Computer Entertainment unveiled a new, sleeker design for the PSP and Electronic Arts offered up some details regarding its multi-title development deal with blockbuster filmmaker Steven Spielberg, whose *Transformers* was at the time tearing up the worldwide box office.

Celebrities could still be found here and there. Activision commissioned actor/comedian Jamie Kennedy to kick off a press conference and interview skateboarding legend Tony Hawk (*Tony Hawk's Proving Ground*) and other talent behind upcoming games. Kennedy took jabs at the gamer audience, quipping "This place



is the only place that makes the guys at Comic-Con look like Ocean's 13," and "There are so many virgins here that Richard Branson is thinking about suing this event."

Virgins or not, attendees were anxious to get experienced with the new crop of games, especially Wii titles such as Konami's addictive *Fishing Master*, which allows the player to cast with the Wii remote and intuitively reel in the catch by spinning the nunchuck attachment. Konami also got spooky with the fall release titles *Silent Hill Origins* and *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles* for PSP. The *Castlevania* title is noteworthy because it marks the North American debut of *Rondo of Blood*, a classic side-scrolling chapter that was previously only released in Japan.

Codemasters kept the horror rolling with previews of *Clive Barker's Jericho*, the kind of bloody, supernatural shooter you would expect from the novelist and director of *Hellraiser*. The game has players taking on more than 20 different kinds of freaky monsters in a realm to which God banished his first attempt at creating life. Other inter-

esting titles coming from Codemasters include the beautifully animated *Turning Point: Fall of Liberty*, which has Nazis attacking American in an alternate history, and *Rise of the Argonauts*, a mythological role-playing game that promises to cut out a lot of the superfluous elements that come with most RPGs in order to focus on character, story and dynamic combat featuring fluid, procedural animation.

Expo goers also got a first look at Electronic Arts' *The Simpsons Game*, which is coming this fall for PlayStation3, PlayStation 2, PSP, Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii and Nintendo DS. The company's *Burnout Paradise* and *Mercenaries 2: World in Flames* also turned out to be popular demos, while other gamers waited for their turns to jam out with Redoctane's eagerly awaited *Guitar Hero III* and sneak a peek at

Microsoft's *Halo 3*.

Not everyone was happy with the new setup of the show, especially those who had to bear the heat of the Barker Hangar, and many question how long the expo can survive. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA)

will certainly have to make some changes if they are going to put on a similar event next year, but for those of us who want the games without the crowds, it's a step in the right direction. If they have to, they can even bring back the scantily dressed booth babes. ■

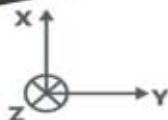


Clive Barker's *Jericho*



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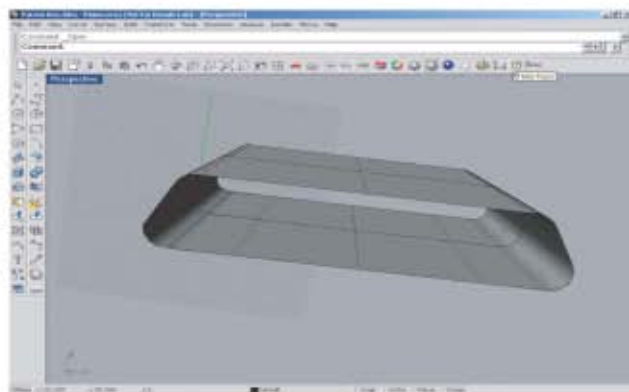
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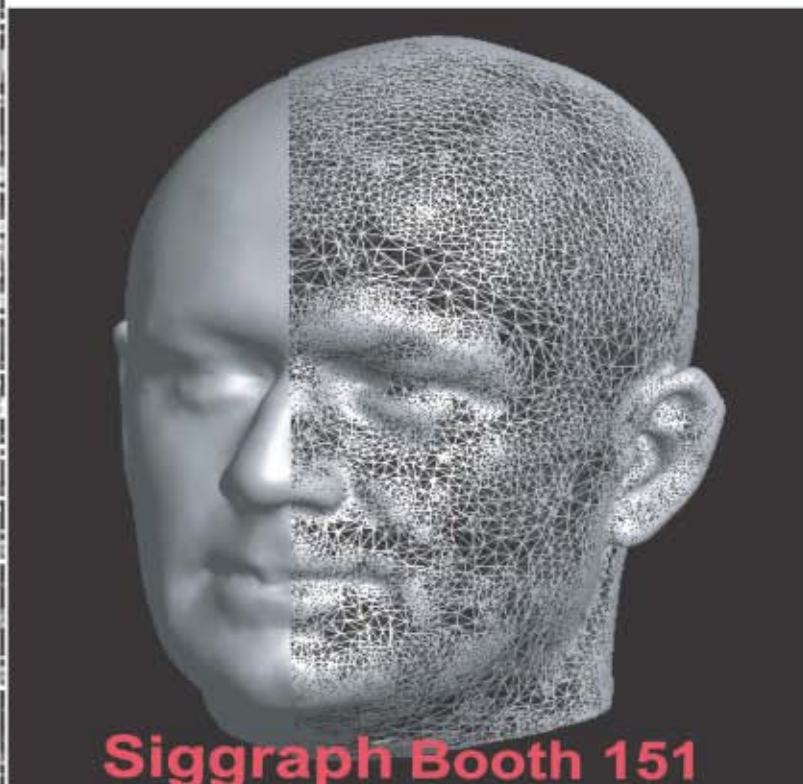
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HOMER'S BIG-SCREEN ODYSSEY

Matt Groening, James L. Brooks, Al Jean and company talk about getting Springfield's infamous toon family ready for their movie close-up. by Michael Mallory

It's five weeks to opening weekend and the creators of *The Simpsons* Movie, Twentieth Century-Fox and Gracie Film's eagerly awaited feature based on TV's longest-running comedy, are still fine-tuning the gags and recording lines. By all accounts, over its 18-month production phase, this film has undergone more revisions than Joan Rivers' face.

For most animated films, this would be an indication of big trouble, but this isn't most animated films. In the world

of *The Simpsons*, the "liquid screenplay" style of production is just the way things are done. "When we started the TV show back in 1989, we tried to reinvent the rules of television animation, which is to make changes much further along in the process than is usually done," says creator Matt Groening. "We've done the equivalent of that in the movie."

Digital compositing and ink-and-paint (don't worry, the character animation is still done by hand) has made the process

even more fluid.

"I was pitching something on a Saturday and David Silverman started drawing it, it got into the movie the next day and was cut by Monday ... idea-to-failure in two days is a real record!" says writer/producer Al Jean, who co-scripted with Groening, James L. Brooks, Ian Maxtone-Graham, George Meyer, David Mirkin, Mike Reiss, Mike Scully, Matt Selman, John Swartzwelder and Jon Vitti. (Whew!) Still, the filmmakers insist that nothing structurally was changed in the process, though a lot of the details have been tweaked,

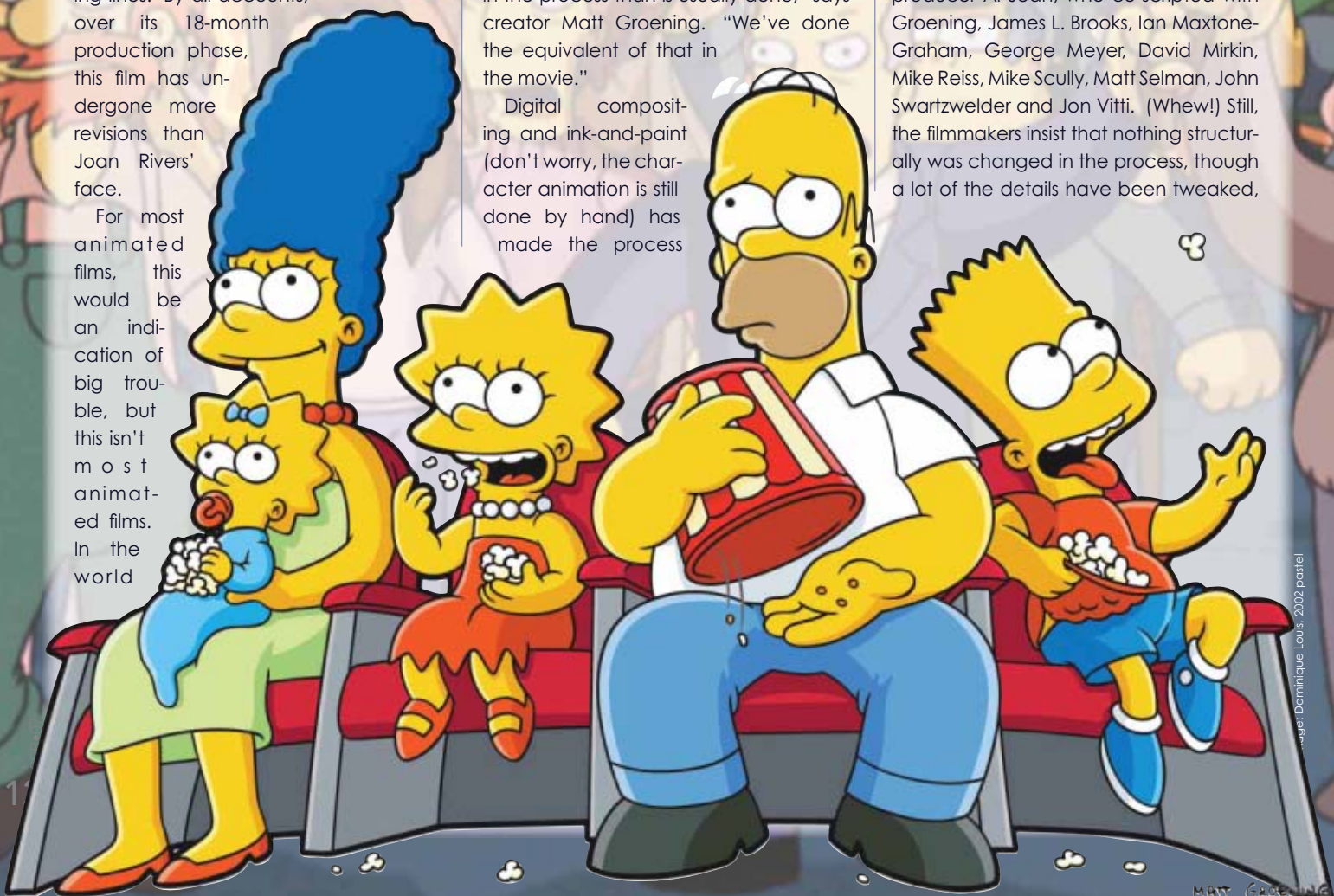


Image: Dominique Louis, 2002 pastel

MATT GROENING



Matt Groening



James L. Brooks



Al Jean

twisted or even removed. Even some of the already publicized guest voices, such as Erin Brockovich—the real one, not Julia Roberts—ended up on the cutting room floor. “It’s very tight, this picture,” says writer/producer/series developer James L. Brooks. “Every line is crucial to setting up a joke, delivering a joke or telling you something you need to know.” More prosaically, the first cut also came in about 15 minutes too long, according to supervising director David Silverman.

In addition to length, there is also the width quotient. Going from a 1.33:1 television as-

pect ratio to a 2.35:1 one means there’s a lot more frame to fill up, but not with faces. “One thing we found we couldn’t really do was the extreme close-ups that you see with other movie star characters,” says Silverman, a charter Simpsonian. “When you get that close all you have are two giant headlight eyeballs and a nose on a field of yellow.”

What does translate in the bump-up, though, are enhanced graphics, such as more detailed, digitally built sets (Maya-based software was used for the backgrounds and U.S. Animation software for the compositing) and shadows on the normally flat characters. Art director Dima Malanichev brought with him experience in enhancing TV-based graphics for the big screen, having previously worked on the *Rugrats* and *Wild Thornberrys* features.

The character animation—provided by Film Roman and Rough Draft Studios—is also enhanced, though Silverman says that is simply a case of being able to lavish more time and care on it than usual. “When doing a show you gauge which

scenes have great acting or are really important to the story and you put everything into those specific scenes,” he says. “[For the feature] I wanted every scene to be at that level.” One shot involving just about the entire population of Springfield transformed into an angry, torch-bearing mob (chasing down Homer, whose actions in the film reach a new personal low), reportedly contains more drawings than are used for an average episode.

Bringing in Rasoul Azadani as layout supervisor also meant that those character animators carried over from the series were able to concentrate strictly on the animation and not do their own layouts, which is the way things work on the series. To accommodate the ramped-up staff, character model sheets were spruced up by Erick Tran.

What really facilitated the ever-changing script, though, was the establishment of “Stacked,” a trailer facility on the Fox lot that was once the offices of a Pamela Anderson TV show (ergo...) that ramped up to produce story reels almost instantly.

"For this movie we were doing story reels for the first time," says producer Richard Sakai, another longtime Simpsonite, who got *Stacked up* and running. "David [Silverman] had this Wacom Cintiq drawing tablet that he hooked up to the server and was able to extract frames out of the story reel, alter them and plug them back into the Avid to do instant changes. We said, 'Wow, wouldn't it be great if we had two of those?'" Within six months, they had 25 Cintiqs manned by a small army of artists crammed into two trailers.

"Different directors [Mike Anderson, Lauren MacMullan, Steve Markowski, Rich Moore and Steve Moore served as sequence directors] would come in if they had a particular sequence they really wanted to work on, and they could have that whole sequence broken up among ten people and could direct as they were going," Sakai says.

The film's solid PG-13 rating means that the envelope is going to be pushed a bit, but not to the max. "This wasn't a license

to go to town," says Brooks.

"The thing that delights us the most is that the film board declared it a PG-13 for 'irreverent humor throughout,' and we couldn't be more pleased with that judgment. I mean, we wept!" "The bigger task," says Groening, "is trying to surprise the audience, especially since we've been on the air for more than 400 episodes and we've done a lot of variations of Homer falling off a cliff."

Which of course begs the question: After nearly two decades on television, why is the movie hitting now? There is a confluence of reasons, ranging from advancements in the technology to the fact that the regular cast—Dan Castellaneta, Julie Kavner, Nancy Cartwright, Yeardley Smith, Hank Azaria, Harry Shearer, Tress MacNeille and Pamela Hayden—signed feature film clauses in their contracts covering seasons 13-through-15, which is when work on the film began.

But the most important element of comedy is timing, and there's no question that the timing is good. "We lucked out," says Jean of the fact that *The Simpsons Movie* is the only major-studio 2D, human-character film out there this year. "I love Pixar movies, but success breeds imitation, and I think people are getting tired of little kiddie animals. It's a good point to be coming out with something that isn't Pixar."

There is, however, one penguin in the film ... but don't tell anyone! ■

Michael Mallory is an award-winning Los Angeles-based journalist who has penned numerous books, including *X-Men: The Characters and Their Universe* and *Landmarked for Murder*.

Fox released *The Simpsons Movie* in theaters nationwide on July 27.

Mementoes from Our Summer of Simpsons Love

So after months of anticipation, we finally got to see *The Simpsons Movie* on the big screen. We laughed, we cried, we wondered when Matt Groening was going to beat J.K. Rowling as the richest creator in the world. Now the big question is how do we extend our happiness by running to the nearest stores and buying as many new Simpsons books, toys and tie-ins as our sad little savings accounts allow us to do. Let somebody else pay the rent/mortgage/babysitter/custody/massage therapist this summer! We'd rather spend our money on important things, like these:

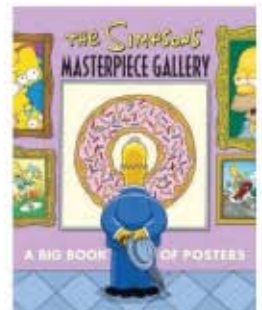
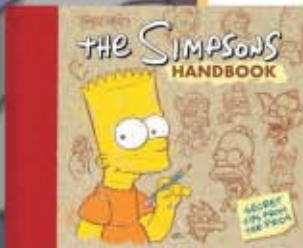
The jury is still out (and arguing loudly on the Internet) about how the tenth season of *The Simpsons* compares to previous years' offerings. However, you can make up your own mind by getting your hands on the new **Tenth Season DVD** out this month. Featuring a supercool collectible Bart Head package, the listed price for this offering is \$49.98, but we know you can find a cheaper rate on Amazon (\$32.49) or in a super store near you! Four discs (that's 550 minutes) worth of Springfield's main family's adventures from the 1998-99 season are included in this outing, which also includes a wealth of behind-the-scenes features, animations, Butterfinger commercials, alternative endings and commentaries from Matt Groening, Al Jean, Mike Scully, David X. Cohen and other exec producers. George Carlin, Martin Mull, Elton John, Lisa Kudrow, Mark Hamill, Alec Baldwin, Kim Basinger, Fred Willard and Stephen Hawking are among the famous guest voices during this season. Homer thinks he can strike it rich by selling grease, decides to become an inventor, turns into a pop artist of sorts, chickens out on donating a kidney to Grandpa, takes Flanders to Vegas and flies the entire family to Tokyo, while Marge has a road-rage breakdown and Bart cares for some bird eggs throughout this action-packed season.

We also squealed with delight when we got a hold of the fantabulous new Harper-Collins book, **The Simpsons Handbook: Secret Tips from the Pros** (\$39.95). This handsome hardcover must-have gives us a window into how "master doodler" Matt Groening and his team draw and give life to our fave dysfunctional family. This one is packed with smooth-as-Maggie's-cheeks pencil sketches and easy-to-learn ways of drawing the characters.

Among the other cool new titles from Harper-Collins is **The Simpsons Masterpiece Gallery: A Big Book of Posters** (\$17.95) which showcases 50 colorful 13.9 x 10.8 poster-type art—including spoofs of *Forrest Gump*, *Star Wars* (Remember Homer as Jabba the Hut?), *Planet of the Apes*, *The Graduate* and *Lady and the Tramp*. If you're on a tighter budget, then you'll like **Greetings from Simpsons** (\$12.95), a nice little postcard-book, featuring 32 ideal smart-alecky messages fit for all occasions!

If you're a toy aficionado, you probably have your hands on McFarlane Toys amazing collection of Simpsonia (Who can forget the Box Set Ironic Punishment, where Satan is feeding Homer donuts?). Then, we have all the new Simpsons Movie action figure sets out on the McFarlane site (www.spawn.com) that make us drool instantly. The one that seems like a definite instant classic is **The Simpsons Box Set: The Island of Dr. Hibbert** (\$29.99), which takes us back to one of our fave *Treehouse of Horror* episodes called "The Island of Lost Souls." Giving Matt Groening the Nobel Peace Prize makes so much darn sense this year. Will somebody please start a petition?

—Ramin Zahed



All About Capes, Masks and Spandex Tights!

There's an abundance of superheroes of all types on the new DVD shelves this month. *by Claire Webb*

Legion of Superheroes Vol. 1 [Warner, \$14.98]

Introduced in the fall of 2006, the series produced by the talented team at Warner Bros. Animation makes its DVD debut with a respectable four-episode release this month. In this set, the *Legion of Superheroes* (first created by Otto Binder and artist Al Plastino back in 1958) travels back in time from the 31st century to add Superman to its crime-fighting roster. Of course, they find out that Supes is still in his adolescent years and living as Clark Kent. However, Superman travels to the future to take on evil villains like the Emerald Empress and uphold justice, before returning to his own century. Episodes include: "Man of Tomorrow," "Timber Wolf," "Legacy" and "Phan-



Darkwing Duck Volume 2 The Tick Vs. Season 2 [Disney, \$34.99]

Superheroes may come in all shapes and sizes, but this month they manifest as a wacky tick and a masked duck as Disney unleashes two blasts from the past. The second season of *The Tick*, created by Ben Edlund, is back with his trusty,

moth suit clad accountant/sidekick Arthur to keep the citizens of The City safe from the likes of El Seed and Brainchild. In these two discs, the Tick makes his reality TV debut and must find a replacement for his beloved Arthur in 12 wacky

episodes. (Note to buyers however, the set is missing Christopher McCulloch's episode *Alone Together*.) And the winged crusader, known as Drake Mallard by day and Darkwing Duck by night, returns for his sophomore season with daughter Goselyn and dim-witted assistant Launchpad McQuack. These 27 episodes on three discs will satisfy your fix for the "terror that flaps in the night" as Darkwing faces foes in the form of Christmas trees, ancient pirates and mutant cabbages! Oh my! This summer's brooding Spider-Man could learn a thing or two from these hilarious crimefighters.

[Release date: Aug. 7]

TMNT: The Movie [Warner Bros., \$28.98]

The popular '80s cult faves *Ninja Turtles* have evolved from comics, to television, to live-action features and now appear transformed in this CGI feature. Directed by Kevin Munroe, and exec produced by original *Turtles* creator Peter Laird, *TMNT* picks up where the live-action versions ended with the brothers in chaos after going their



separate ways. Yet Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and Donatello must resolve their differences in order to take on new industrialist villain Max Winters (voiced by Patrick Stewart) who lusts at world domination and plans to revive 13 ancient monsters to facilitate a global takeover. Rat sensei Splinter (voiced by Mako) and reporter April O'Neil (Sarah Michelle Gellar) are still in the mix trying to keep the turtles a cohesive force. Loaded with intense and visually captivating battle scenes, and narrated by *Matrix* man Laurence Fishburne, the film is animated by the ace team at IMAGI and was a big indie hit at the box office this past spring. The DVD also comes with bonus features like an alternate ending and opening, deleted scenes and a featurette on the stellar voice talent. Cawabunga,

dude!

[Release date: Aug. 7]

Doctor Strange: The Sorcerer Supreme [Lionsgate, \$19.98]

If you weren't in San Diego to catch the world premiere of *Doctor Strange* at Comic-Con last month, don't despair! The Lionsgate/Marvel Studios animated feature, directed by Jay Oliva (*The Invincible Iron Man*) is coming to a DVD store near you in August. Fans of the Sorcerer Supreme can learn about the beginnings of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's talented neurosurgeon and see how he travels to study under the tutelage of the Ancient One after a crippling accident. Upon discovering his magical gifts, he returns to New York to utilize his power to cast illusions, read minds and decipher ancient texts to defend the Marvel Universe from malevolent forces. The release also includes a bonus featurette "Who is Dr. Strange?", loads of *Doctor Strange* concept art and a "First Look at Avengers Reborn" feature.

[Release date: Aug. 14] ■



toms," with all the action, heroism and even a little bit of romance that a superhero series would warrant. The DVD also comes with a bonus section titled "We Are Legion," which provides a look at the history of the property with an interview with comic-guru Paul Levitz. Although some may be disgruntled about the short running time, eager fans can get their *Legion* fix without waiting for the larger box set. [Release date: Aug. 28]

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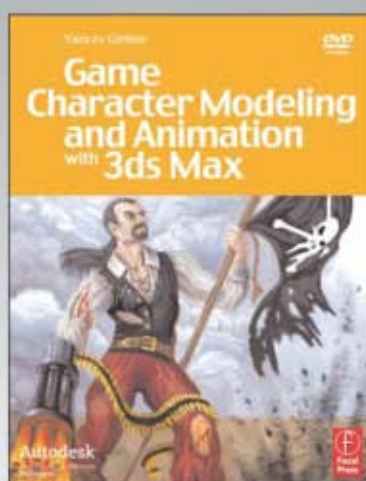
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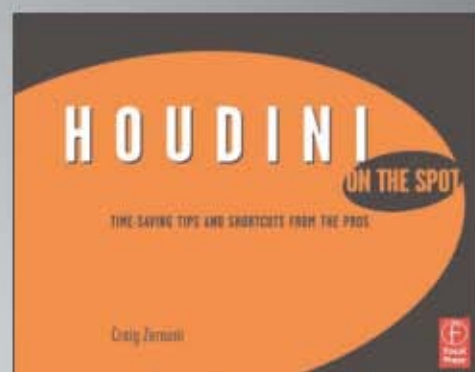
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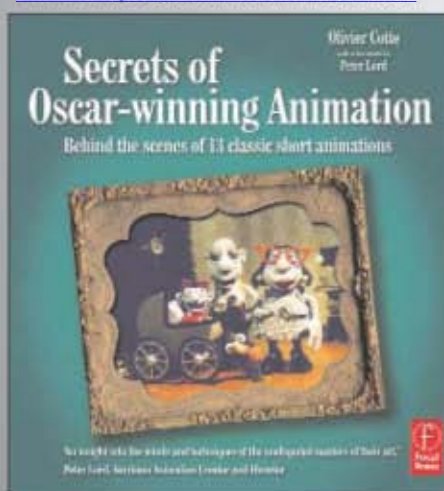
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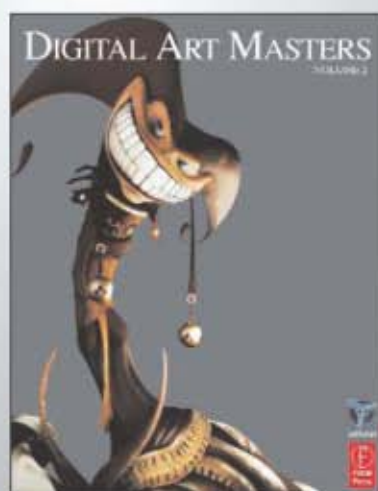
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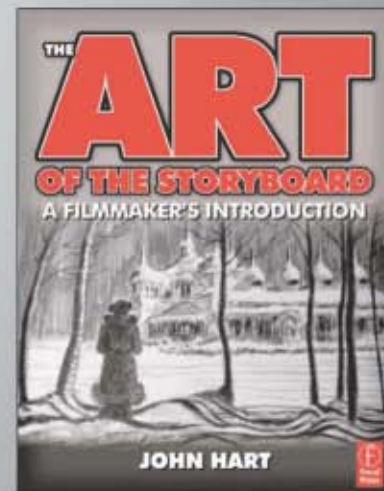
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Postcards from the Bleeding Edge

SIGGRAPH '07 offers a killer compendium of up-to-the-minute CG technologies and all their eye-popping applications in the entertainment field. **by Ramin Zahed**

As audiences who are accustomed to seeing dazzlingly realistic images of shape-shifting robots, tentacled pirates and goat-cheese-loving CG rats this summer season, we've all come to expect the impossible from our digital wizards. That's why the folks who selected this year's program for SIGGRAPH's computer animation festival (Aug. 5-9 in San Diego) definitely had their work cut out for them.

Led by SIGGRAPH veteran, Paul Debevec—the director of USC's Institute for Creative Technologies—the computer animation festival jurors looked at some 905 submissions from all over the world. It's interesting to note that there was a 20 percent increase from the number of submissions from 2006 (which also grew 20% from 2005).

The improvements in communication technology have certainly played a big role in this surge in interest. "We did a lot of outreach and solicited content from all around the world," says Debevec. "People could also upload their high-def work on the SIGGRAPH website—and that certainly made it easier for animators to submit their work."

It was a top priority to select a jury that represented all different realms of the CG universe as the submissions were divided

into eight categories of scientific visualization, art, visual effects, broadcast, real time videogames, cinematics, research and animated shorts. "Traditionally, we would have eight members reviewing eight different submission categories, but I believed that we could get more bang for our buck if each juror represented two or more of the categories," says Debevec. Carter Emmart (American Museum of Natural History), Nickson Fong (Egg Story Creative Productions), Michael Kass (Pixar Animation Studios), Randal Kleiser (RK Productions), Gavin Miller (Adobe Systems), Shelley Page (DreamWorks Animation), Jay Redd (Sony Pictures Imageworks) and Habib Zargarpour (Electronic Arts) made up the distinguished jury this year.

"Our goal was to showcase the most innovative and excellent material across the full spectrum

of computer graphics," explains Debevec, who dazzled SIGGRAPH audiences with his own project *The Parthenon* in 2004. "What I love about our selection is the fact that it reflects a real great mix of all these disciplines coming together—a great meeting of the left and right sides of the mind. We want to offer snapshots of the state of the art of the industry in 2007, so people can look back at the program and know what we were doing in this time in history."

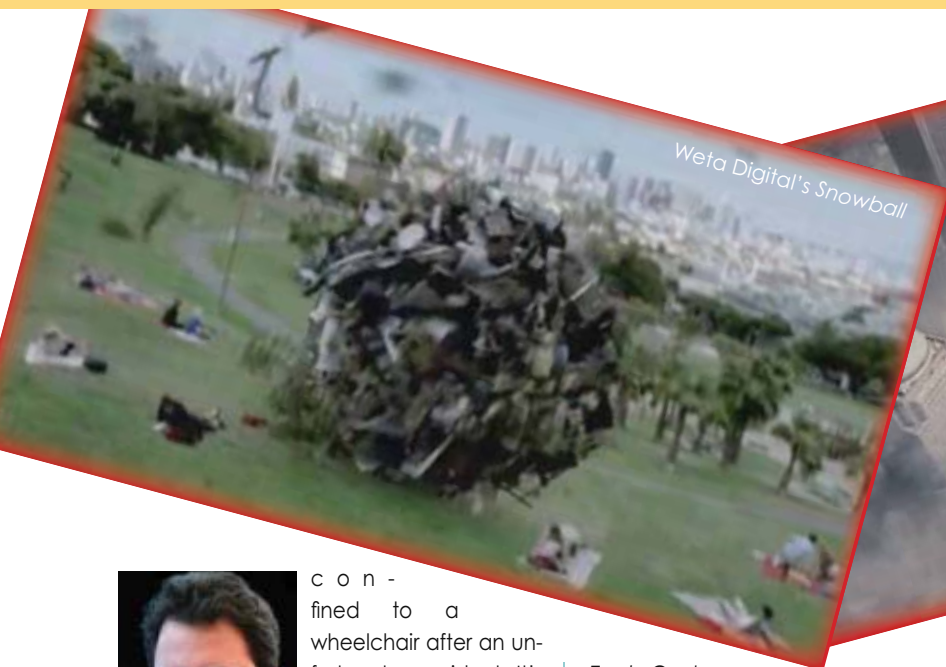
The 2007 Best of Show prize went to *The Ark*, by Polish animators—Grzegorz Jonkajtys and Marcin Kobylecki. Already selected as a contender at the Cannes Festival, the short is set against a dark future in which an unknown virus has destroyed almost the entire human population. *Dreammaker* by Leszek Plichta, a student at Germany's Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg, is the recipient of the festival's Jury Honor. The short tells the story of a talented dream-maker who has chosen to focus on only one purpose—the creation of a special dream for himself.

Supinfocom Valenciennes students François-Xavier Goby, Edouard Jouret and Matthieu Landour will be receiving the show's Award of Excellence for their *En Tus Brazos* (*In Your Arms*). Their short tells the tale of the greatest tango dancer of the 1920's who finds himself



Spider-Man 3





Paul Debevec

con-
fined to a
wheelchair after an un-
fortunate accident. It's
interesting to note that
this is the first time in SIG-
GRAPH history that two
of the top award-win-
ning films are student

entries. In all, the jurors selected 134 pieces for the Computer Animation Festival section of the event.

When asked to give us his favorite highlights of the Electronic Theater program, Debevec mentions a clever Weta Digital commercial (directed by Dante Ariola) which is done for Travelers Insurance titled *Snowball*. "It follows a poor pedestrian who trips and falls down a steep street in San Francisco, and things keep sticking to him, until he becomes part of a 100-foot-tall ball, runs into cars, crashes into a wedding...it's very well-executed, and one of the many examples of vfx that are used in commercials these days and are equivalent to those used in feature films," he explains.

The dazzling vfx work done by CaféFX for Guillermo del Toro's 2006 feature *Pan's Labyrinth* and Double Negative's shots for Oliver Stone's *World*

Trade Center are also on top of Debevec's list of things to catch at the festival. "Another neat piece of art is *Swirl* by a U.K. artist named Lee Griggs," he adds. "It's pretty much a strange swirling shape lit by very realistic daylight illumination. It's pulled out of a fluid simulation, and the extracted surface is visualized swirling around. It's a gorgeous shape, lasts only 20 seconds, and it's unlike anything else we have in the show!"

Confab goers can also take in some of the short CG-animated projects done by top-name studios in 2006 such as Blur Studio's *A Gentleman's Duel*, Blue Sky's *No Time for Nuts* and Pixar's *Lifted*. "We also have a couple of pieces way out of the left field," notes Debevec. "There's a short called *Raymond*, done by The Mill (Fabrice le Nezet, Jules Janaud, Francois Roisin). It's a very French piece about some strange experiment that involves manipulating a poor fellow by dropping chemicals on his head. It's a high-def short and it's quite out there, and I'm really glad it's there because it really keeps the energy up."

According to the festival organizers, a record number of Real-Time

graphics content will be presented at both theaters. Among Debevec's favorites is an arresting NVIDIA demo (*The GeForce 8 Demo Suite*) which stars well-regarded vfx actor Doug Jones (Silver Surfer, Abe Sapien). He also men-

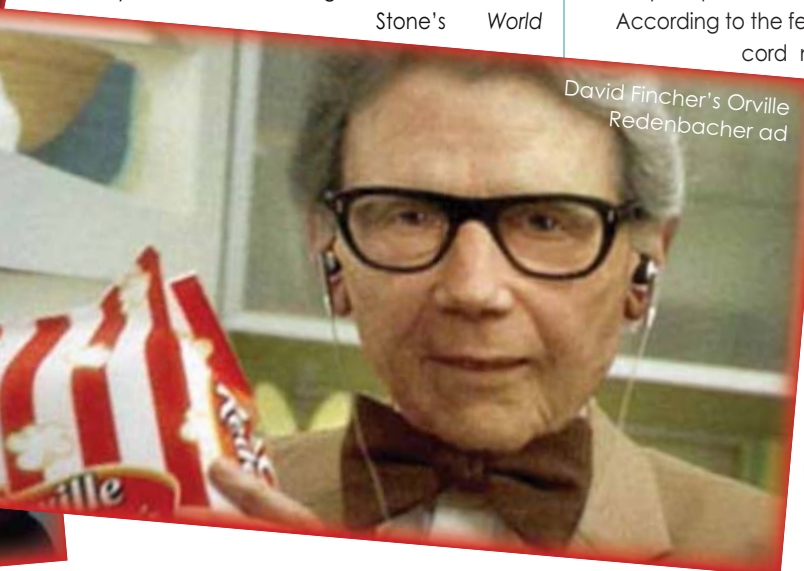
tions a well-visual-
ized game created by the

Valve Corporation called *Portal*. "I think audiences will be pleased with this game: you are going through this maze-like environment, a gun shot creates this hole in the wall, and you can go through this hole and escape all kinds of hazards. The game really represents the new possibilities that are available to us today."

If observers of this year's computer graphics confab were looking for trends or themes, Debevec says you can certainly see amazing CG simulations of water (see *Surf's Up* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, for example), and realistic digital characters seen in David Fincher's Digital Domain ad, *Orville Redenbacher*, The Mill's Johnnie Walker *Human* spot and Volker Helzle's (Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg) digital representation of actor Klaus Kinski. "It's been a very good year for realistic digital humans," says Debevec. "Sure, we're not quite 100 percent perfect, but we're way past 95 percent. A couple of shots may still fall in the middle of the uncanny valley and can look creepy, but we're truly on the threshold of reaching that holy grail."

Overall, Debevec and his team of digital wizards have paid close attention to putting together a program that reflects an entertaining snap shot of where we are and what has been made possible in 2007. "If I could screen this show to myself and my colleagues back in 1996, I think it would make our heads spin for several days," he believes. "We have reached the point that with enough resources, anything in anyone's mind can be realized as realistically and artistically as possible. Our hope is to have people's minds stretched and their preconceptions challenged." ■

For more info about this year's confab, visit www.siggraph.org/2007.





Filmakademie Student Realizes His Dream with *Dreammaker*

by Ryan Ball

Of the 134 pieces selected for this year's Computer Animation Festival at SIGGRAPH, Grzegorz Jonkajtys and Marcin Kobylecki's *The Ark*, Leszek Plichta's *Dreammaker* and Francois-Xavier Goby, Edouard Jouret and Matthieu Landour's *En Tus Brazos* (*In Your Arms*) rose to the top of the heap with judges, taking Best of Show, Jury Honor and Award of Excellence, respectively. The prize winners will be honored during the computer graphics convention, taking place Aug. 5-9 in San Diego, Calif.

For the first time in the history of SIGGRAPH, two of the award-winning films are student entries. Goby, Jouret and Landour made *En Tus Brazos* at Supinfocom Valenciennes and Plichta's *Dreammaker* was completed at Germany's Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg.

Dreammaker tells the story of a talented creature who has grown tired of granting the wishes of others and chooses to focus on creating a special dream for himself. Plichta tells us he wanted to make an animated movie that dealt with complex characters rather than relying on slapstick humor. "I do not even see it as an animated movie but as a movie with real people," he comments. "[The dreammak-

er] is trapped in a vicious circle, a self-built labyrinth, that keeps him from a life worth living, clinging to a past of which he can't let go."

Working from a script by Dominik

simulation and fluid dynamics for the smoke effects. "They never did what I wanted them to and took forever to calculate."

"After all the years of work it is very satisfying to see that people like my movie," Plichta says of winning the SIGGRAPH award. "Most of the time you are flying blind doing a movie, more so in animation. You often need support from people around you and a bag full of hope (some might call it madness) to stay on track. And, at last, you need to show it to the audience, which might just rip you apart in seconds. Seems I got lucky this time."

After the convention, Plichta plans to celebrate with a three-month vacation in southeast Asia. He then plans to do some commercial work (or sell some worn underwear on the Internet, he jokes) to make rent while dreaming up the next project. "Maybe I will get so inspired or mad in Asia that I will decide to do another short film, or go absolutely insane and do a feature—all by myself!"

This year saw a record-breaking 905 entries for the Computer Animation



Leszek Plichta

Steffan, Plichta toiled away on the film over a four-year period, using 3ds Max in conjunction with Vray as the main renderer. Water simulation was achieved in Realflow, while Photoshop was used for textures and matte paintings. Compositing was handled in Digital Fusion. He says elements that gave him the biggest headache were cloth

Festival, which recognizes exemplary use of computer-generated imagery, animation and storytelling. Since 1999, the SIGGRAPH Computer Animation Festival has also been an official qualifying festival for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Best Animated Short Film award. ■

For more info, visit www.dreammaker.de.



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News Bytes from the Expo:

A round-up of the latest tech news from SIGGRAPH

Graduating to Post-Penguin Era

Sydney-based vfx studio **Animal Logic** will have a strong presence at SIGGRAPH this year. The folks who created the CG animation for blockbuster *Happy Feet* have signed a deal with Warner Bros. to co-develop and produce animated feature films. They will be presenting a Special Session panel called "Happy Feet: Thawing the CG Pipeline" on Monday, August 6 at 6 p.m. and looking for future employees at the job fair. They'll also have their eyes peeled for the latest Stereo 3-D displays, interactive surfaces and high dynamic range projection at the confab. For more info, visit www.animallogic.com.



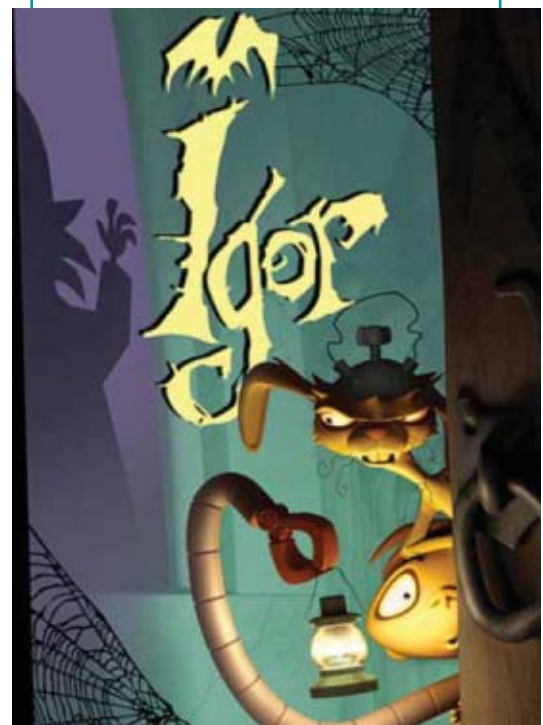
High-Def Highlights

The folks at Austin-based **D7 Studios** wrote us to tell us that they released the first episode of their new series titled *Revelation* in July. "The episode is mated in 1080p HD resolution and will be available online as well as on DVD," says animator Arik Renee Avila. "We are also pioneering a method of online interactive storytelling integrated with advertising. We'll release a demo version in the coming months." You can find out about the studio and all its awesome-looking projects at www.d7studios.com.



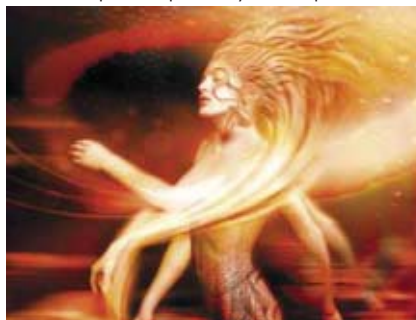
That Certain French Flair

Founded in 1995 in Paris, **Sparx* Animation Studios** has had a rich history of working on high-end 3D keyframe animated projects such as the Emmy-winning Nelvana toon *Rolie Polie Olie*, the French preschool show *Zoé Kézako*, *Dragon Hunters*, Disney's *Twice Upon a Christmas* and the upcoming Exodus/Weinstein feature *Igor*. With offices in Los Angeles, Paris and Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam, the studio is going through another growth phase. The Paris and Ho Chi Min City studios are fully networked and share the same High Def technologies and production pipeline. "We have the passion, the talent, the technology and equipment to bring your creations to life," says Laddie Ervin, the company's VP of business development for North America. We know they'll have their eyes on hot new talent at SIGGRAPH, so you'd be wise to hit them up with your portfolio! For more background info, visit www.sparx.com.



Capturing the Moment

Although **REALVIZ Movimento** was actually unveiled at last year's SIGGRAPH in Boston, the company will be showing the mo-cap tool at its Booth (No. 1629) to fans and professionals. Movimento offers the unique capability to capture the motion of any non-rigid object (i.e. humans and animals) in post, from synchronized image sequences with total flexibility. Users can utilize Movimento's ability to create facial, hand, arm and full-body motion capture across a full range of applications. CFX pros will also be able to check out the **REALVIZ HDR Imaging Studio**, which packs Stitcher 5.6, Vtour 1.2 HDR and Photomatix Pro. The program is now available in English for Windows. For more info about these products, visit www.realviz.com.



The Wonderful World of NVIDIA

With a widely admired short (*Plush Life*) and awesome demos, **NVIDIA** will have a huge presence at the CG confab this year. In addition, the graphics processor tech titan will be unveiling the *Tesla*, a new line of processors for high-performance computing. By pairing Tesla with NVIDIA Quadro graphics technology utilizing NVIDIA CUDA, a standard C development tool, the company is transforming standard workstations into a "personal supercomputer" for creative professionals and designers. To check out the company's latest achievements, visit booths No. 413, 513 at the confab.



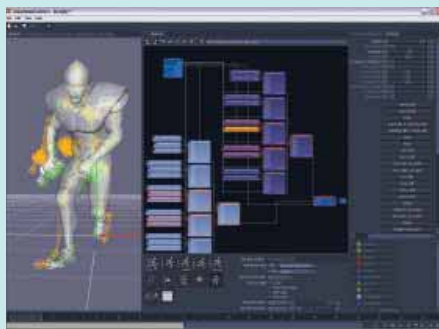
Color Consistency Matters

Calif.-based Duiker Research Corp. will introduce SIGGRAPH attendees to its new suite of vfx plug-ins, **Color Symmetry**. This innovative product allows users to preview the look of printed film as they create and manipulate vfx images on a monitor. CS also streamlines the process by providing the tools needed to see and work with color consistently between visual effects applications, platforms and even facilities. These plug-ins cover a full range of top compositing, animation and image manipulation packages, including Adobe After Effects and Photoshop; Apple Shake; Autodesk Toxik, 3ds Max and Maya; Newtek Lightwave; Eyeon Digital Fusion; Iridas Framecycler; and Assimilate Scratch. The Color Symmetry suite also extends to rendering applications such as mental images Mental Ray. For further information, visit www.colorsymmetry.com.



NaturalMotion by the Ocean

If you've been curious about **NaturalMotion's** new dynamic engines, you'll be wise to stop by the company's booth (No. 603) as they'll be demonstrating their latest products **morphe**, **euphoria** and **endorphin**. The latest version of the company's advanced animation engine *morphe* 1.2, is designed to give animators creative control over the look of their animations in-game, by allowing them to author and preview blending, transitions and compressions in real time. NaturalMotion will also demonstrate *euphoria*, the DMS run-time animation technology being used by LucasArts and Rockstar. *Euphoria* synthesizes interactive animations on the fly to create unique game play moments for next-generation game titles. NaturalMotion will also demonstrate *endorphin* 2.7, the latest version of its award-winning DMS 3D character animation software. Go to www.naturalmotion.com for more information on the company's SIGGRAPH events.



Online Class of '07

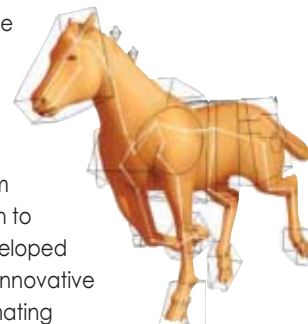
In previous years, we've written about the awesome online animation school **AnimationMentor.com**, where working studio animators act as teachers to students on the web all over the world. This year, the school will be holding its second graduation event concurrent with SIGGRAPH. The address will be presented by Sony Imageworks' David Schaub (*Surf's Up*). According to the org, students from 17 countries will graduate from the online school this year. "By holding graduations simultaneous with the industry's premiere event, we are saying that we are here to stay, right in the middle of things," says Animation Mentor president/CEO Bobby S. Beck. The graduation ceremony will take place Monday, August 6, at 2 p.m. at the San Diego Convention Center, followed by a reception at 5:30 p.m. at the W Hotel. A big congrats from all of us at Animag to the talented Class of 2007!



David Schaub

Top Training for Maya Artists

Oklahoma City-based **Digital-Tutors** will be showing off its latest video-based training packages **Rigging Quadrupeds in Maya** and **Animating Quadrupeds in Maya**. These are the latest titles in DT's growing library of interactive training for digital artists using Maya. "After being asked on a near daily basis to develop training for quadruped-centric rigging and animation, our team took a solution-based approach to rigging and animating and developed a training series to teach artists innovative techniques for rigging and animating quadrupeds," says Delano Athias, animation lead at Digital-Tutors. "The techniques artists will learn will be transferable to a number of quadruped characters. We will also provide insight to the differences in anatomical structures, how to use a production workflow that allows easy changes to be made and building animator-friendly controls." Check out these and other training titles at www.digitaltutors.com.





How to Hatch Dinosaurs with Big Brains!

Creating the smart reptiles of BBC/Discovery Channel's *DinoSapien* was a job suited for highly evolved CG artists.

by Chris Grove

When producer Rick Siggelkow re-discovered his childhood passion for the Jurassic period a few years ago, he was hit with a notion that had never occurred to him as a youngster with a menagerie of not-to-scale plastic dinosaurs: "Thank goodness they were wiped out," he thought!

Dinosaurs ruled the planet for some 119,850,000 years longer than *Homo sapiens* have. And had a comet smashing into the earth 65 million years ago not wiped them out, their evolved cousins might still be in control. "The more I found out about them, the more in awe I was," says Siggelkow from his New York office. Needless to say, a pack of velosaptors with high IQs would make the hellish commute on the 405 an even dicier proposition than it is now.

His relief that dinosaurs didn't survive the cosmic catastrophe had an unintended consequence: it proved to be the genesis for Siggelkow's latest series, *DinoSapien* (Discovery Channel, BBC and others). The pitch to producers was a twist on the *Jurassic Park* premise, asking the question: What if some dinosaurs had survived and evolved? What would they be like? (A clue: For those of us who either made the mistake of by-passing high school Latin or didn't have the option, *DinoSapien* means "smart dinosaur.") And Siggelkow's series is filled with them.

Set (and filmed) in the Canadian badlands of Alberta, *DinoSapien* tells the story of 15 year-old Lauren (Brittney Wilson of Nickelodeon's *Romeo!*) whose father mysteriously disappeared on a fossil expedition there.

While Lauren struggles to come to terms with his death, she and friends work at a dinosaur camp run by her mother. The mystery of Lauren's father deepens when she encounters a live, seemingly intelligent dinosaur she names Eno. While the two form a cautious bond, Lauren tries to solve the mystery while keeping multiple secrets. Among other things, she must protect Eno from both the dangerous Diggers (dinosaurs that are hunting Eno and trying to kill him) and a mysterious paleontologist who's trying to track down Eno for his own purposes.

As it turns out, there has been a considerable body of paleontology research in the past 40 years that has speculated along the lines of Siggelkow's Jurassic what-if. In the 1970s, for example, Dale Russell, a noted paleontologist, constructed a model of what a modern dinosaur would look like. When Siggelkow spoke to Russell recently, it solidified the series' concept. "The challenge was to mix the science with the needs of a fictional story," he says. Siggelkow and his longtime producing partner Jim Corston didn't want Barney. What they needed was for Eno to have veracity mixed with enough "human" characteristics to make it possible for the key tween demographic to emotionally connect with him. Dinosaurs, for example, had no facial muscles so they could not show any emotion at all. "They had two expressions," says Siggelkow with a laugh, "jaws open and jaws closed." So Eno (and his competitors) were given the musculature necessary to show their feelings.

During the critical character design phase, the producers turned to Hall Train, a dinosaur animator and

special effects producer who creates and builds dinosaur exhibits for natural history museums, science centers and theme parks. Well-known paleontologist Gregory Paul was also added to the team. "It was an amazing collaboration. I felt like we were creating a new life form," Siggelkow says. At one point Hall built a plywood scale-model of Eno's tail and videotaped himself walking around his house with the device attached.

The challenge of translating the models and contraptions into digital counterparts fell to Toronto-based Yowza Animation. Pete Denomme, Yowza's executive producer says the producers and animation team spent a lot of time debating how Eno and the Diggers would react anatomically. "Since the dinosaurs would have no language outside of what we imagined they might do in nature, all communication had to come through the body which is a serious challenge for the animators to make real," Denomme says. Eno, it was decided, is a descendent of *dromaeosaurs*, a member of the raptor family that had evolved in the rainforest. The villain Diggers, meanwhile, are descendents of the cave-dwelling *ornithomimids*. It's believed that raptors had a larynx similar to those of modern parrots. They could theoretically mimic other species voices when hunting in packs.

In addition to its creative challenges, *DinoSapien* has also sometimes taxed the concept of transcontinental post-production. While the practice isn't new—many films and TV shows film in one country and post in another—the volume of effects work on each episode can tax *Dino*'s pipeline. According to Nick Keene, lead editor of BBC Post Production around 10,000-15,000 files travel back and forth per episode, needing around 30 gigs of storage. "It's benefiting the production enormously, enabling us to save days in the schedule and deliver work within extremely tight deadlines," he says. Daily rushes, shot on HD Cam are sent to London where they're down-converted to standard definition. Copies are then sent back to Toronto for an offline edit. The rough cut, without animation, is compiled and sent to BBC Post where the program is conformed in high def using the edit decision lists (EDLs) from Canada. After color correction using Pogle, the animation backplanes are sent to the FTP site for the animators to use as backgrounds for the CGI dinosaurs. Each episode has an average of six minutes of CGI animation.

Since the show debuted in July it has been well received both in the ratings and critically (the *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, calls the series "wildly imaginative"). *DinoSapien* is a co-production between the BBC and Discovery. The arrangement made the series eligible for some generous tax credits. With the continuing weakening of the U.S. dollar versus the Canadian dollar—the exchange rate has become a non-factor. The show recently debuted in the U.S., Canada, the U.K. (on BBC1) and in Australia. Several more deals are in negotiations in at least 10 additional territories. ■

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**– Robin Fuller, director, THE BALLAD OF MARY SLADE,
winner of the 2007 Grand Jury Award for Best Animated Short**

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Your SIGGRAPH Tip Sheet

Short Takes

✓ Check out the three groundbreaking CG-animated shorts honored by fest organizers: Marcin Kobylecki's **The Ark** (Best of Show), Leszek Plichta's **Dreammaker** (Jury Honors) and Francois-Xavier Goby, Edouard Jouret and Matthieu Landour's **En Tus Brazos** (Award of Excellence).



The Ark



Dreammaker



En Tus Brazos

Words of Wisdom

✓ It's a SIGGRAPH tradition to get up-close and personal with some of the movers and shakers in the computer graphics universe. This year, we get to hear from **Glenn Entis**, senior VP, chief visual and technical officer for Electronic Arts, as he talks about "Recent Accomplishments and Upcoming Challenges for Interactive Graphics in Videogames." Also on tap is well-loved author and comic-book artist **Scott McCloud** who will speak on "Comics: A Medium in Transition."

Scott McCloud



32 Hours to Toon Up

✓ This year marks the inaugural "iron animator" event known as **FJORG!** That's right, you get to witness three-person teams of CG animators compete to create the best character-driven animation the world has ever witnessed. It will be interesting to see how they cope with the challenge of keeping their eyes open and hands clicking for 32 straight hours.



Look Back in Wonder

✓ Revisit some of the favorite vfx-driven movies of the past few months and find out how some of the industry's top vfx supervisors created the killer visuals of projects such as **300**, **Shrek the Third**, **Transformers**, **Pan's Labyrinth**, **Surf's Up**, **Children of Men**, **Spider-Man 3**, **Charlotte's Web** and **Arthur and the Invisibles**.



Transformers

Commercial Sense

✓ Many of the cool CG effects we see in movies were first perfected in TV commercials. Don't forget to watch the highlights of some of these mind-blowing blurbs. Among our favorites: **PSYOP's** "Happiness Factory" commercial for Coke, **The Mill's** "Moon Office" ad for FedEx and **Method Studios'** "Dance Tron" for Pepsi.



Happiness Factory

Size Matters

✓ Don't forget to experience some of the content made for small-screen platforms on the giant Animation Theater screen, such as Jerry and Orrin Zucker's Emmy-winning Internet series **It's JerryTime!** or Beck's "Girl" video, featuring cool visuals by Motion Theory.



It's JerryTime!



Beck's "Girl"

Games Without Frontiers

✓ Last year when Boston hosted Siggraph, Animation Festival attendees were treated to pre-screening interactive game. Our tight-lipped sources say similar plans are underway this year. **A famous mystery figure** will lead the audience in a special interactive pre-screening event which will involve a popular retro game. Who's it going to be? Steve Jobs? Bill Gates? Lara Croft? Sonic the Hedgehog? Ms. Pacman? If we told you, we'd have to kill you!



The Skinny on Stereo 3-D!

3-D expert Alexander Lentjes answers a few questions about the brave, new frontier in animation.

Animation Magazine: Tell us about how you became interested in working in 3-D?

Alexander Lentjes: After producing my animation graduation film in 3-D and putting it online in 2000, I kept receiving e-mails with questions about how to do 3-D for film and animation. 3-D film knowledge is hindered by an enormous amount of disinformation and smoke & mirrors put up by 3-D hardware manufacturers and stereographers. So I decided to provide the information on my website, the3drevolution.com. Since then I have researched every aspect of 3-D film making and have provided consulting for countless 3-D shorts and film productions, animation and live action alike—besides running my animation production company 3-D Revolution Productions.

We are seeing more and more productions created for stereoscopic 3-D. How would you convince an animator to pursue this path?

Lentjes: The biggest plus of stereoscopic 3-D is the ability to really involve the viewer in the world presented on screen and in the story being told. When employed properly, 3-D is a magical, almost touchable experience that will stay with the viewer for a long, long time, in the best possible way.

What are the big drawbacks of 3-D?

Lentjes: One danger of 3-D is the possibility of it taking the viewer out of the story and reminding him that he is watching a 3-D movie. This is done with clumsy 3-D shots. 3-D has also enjoyed a gimmicky name for a long time and this can reflect badly on projects. Quality 3-D will battle this stigma. Another minus is the complexity and the technicality of 3-D, which very easily results in poor 3-D and headaches. The easiest way to avoid

these problems is to get a 3-D expert involved from day one of production.

What is feasible for an indie animator to do in 2007?

Lentjes: Stereo 3-D rendering of CGI is, technically speaking, an easy thing to do. 3-D conversion is a hot topic, and it is not difficult to convert to 3-D. It requires frame-by-frame work rotoscoping the imagery for depth application and is purely a mat-



Moonridge 5

ter of manual labor. What's been done since 1895 is to shoot 3-D film with two cameras. Surprisingly, however, 3-D stop motion has only happened three times in film history—one of which was my graduation film! The same goes for multi-planed 2D animation, drawn or computer-based, with about five titles in existence.

What kind of a price bump can you expect when you are looking to work in Stereo 3-D?

Lentjes: Overall one should count on a 120-150 percent cost compared to regular animation. First of all you will need to get a 3-D professional involved. Storyboarding needs to be done with extra panels for the 3-D layout, which will cost extra time. 3-D camera setups need to be layed-out, which adds to layout time. Animation needs to be done with an extra dimension in mind, adding to the time spent animating and checking. There are obviously more reshoots and there's double the compositing difficulty. And then



Alexander Lentjes

there's twice the amount of rendering and disk space required for editing and delivery.

In your view, which projects are more suitable for this technology?

Lentjes: The projects that can employ the stereoscopic image to enhance the story, its characters and their interactions. So are you just creating a 3-D space or are you actually using it? Content-wise, almost anything can work well in 3-D. There are some technical limitations like the current inability to correctly display 3-D on television, the need for 3-D glasses distri-

bution, the eye-tiring factor of 3-D that limits screen time and the inability to do very fast and crazy cuts. Other than that, your imagination is the limit!

Would you please walk us through some of the hits and misses of the format?

Lentjes: Only about 20 3-D animated feature films of a total of 220 stereoscopic titles have ever been released

since 1915. In my opinion, *Shrek 4-D* (2003) is the best piece of 3-D film in cinema history. DreamWorks really did an amazing job and I am confident that their future 3-D releases will be very good in terms of 3-D. Other excellent 3-D titles are *The Polar Express*, *Popeye-The Ace of Space* and the Disney 1953 classic, *Melody* (directed by Ward Kimball and Charles A. Nichols).

A title with botched animation and 3-D is 2001 IMAX release *Haunted Castle*, which is a shame. Totally safe and boring 3-D is used in *Meet the Robinsons*. It's a different Disney from the studio that produced *Melody* alright! ■

Alexander Lentjes is an animation producer and director and a 3-D Stereoscopic consultant based in Clifton, Bristol. When not engaged in 3-D stereoscopic production and consulting, he produces and directs animation with his production company 3-D Revolution Productions, with a focus on television animation. His most recent production was Moonridge 5 which was presented at Cartoon Forum in 2006.

Monsters vs. Aliens
(DreamWorks Animation)

Chris Wedge

mation production for Sony Pictures Imageworks, says character animators are always in demand; character TDs also are pretty

All Tooned Up for Work

Industry pros discuss the [overall healthy] state of the business and employment prospects for animators in the next few quarters. *by Thomas J. McLean*

As CG animators gather once again at the SIGGRAPH confab in San Diego, they can focus on learning the latest tips and tricks secure in the knowledge that the opportunities for them to apply what they learn continue to grow at a robust pace.

"The state of the business is fantastic," says Chris Wedge, director of Fox/Blue Sky Studios' *Ice Age* and *Robots*. "There's as much business as we want. The challenge is to decide what to put out there."

Recruiting and production execs at the top studios making animated features say demand is high for all kinds of animators. While some skills are at times more in demand than others, understanding the basics of animation and the ability to work well with others are in most cases more important than proficiency in a particular type of software.

"The computer is a tool. Everything else is thinking," says Dawn Rivera-Ernster, director of talent development for Walt Disney Animation Studios. "The

essential skills never change. Animation is posing and timing," agrees Wedge. "The software is not as important."

That said, Barry Weiss, senior VP of ani-

hot commodities. "None of them are really easy to fill," he says. Character animators are a little easier to come by because there are more people with those skills, while character TDs are tougher.

Gloria Borders, head of PDI/DreamWorks, says the studio is always on the lookout for the very best talent it can find in all positions. "We're looking for great effects developers," she says. "We're looking for the top-notch water guy, we're looking for research and development guys who can help us develop this stereoscopic vision that no one has ever seen before."

"We're all looking, we're all going to the same places, all going to the same people and all basically have a similar requirement or need," says Rivera-Ernster.

The resulting competition is good news for animators. "It's a really good time for artists and technicians who really know what they want to do and excel in their discipline," she says.

That competition includes more than just other animation studios, as animation skills are in demand at visual effects houses and in the video game biz. "Each area is helping each other," says Borders. "People coming



The Tale of Despereaux (Universal)

continued on page 30

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- Aja Bogdanoff
*Animation Mentor Graduate
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- Mike Stern
*Animation Mentor Graduate
DreamWorks Feature Animation*



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The Princess and the Frog
(Disney)

All Tooned Up

continued from page 28

from video games are sharing technology and techniques with the CG animation studios and we're learning from them and they're learning from us."

Stan Szymanski, senior VP of digital production at Sony Imageworks, says projects like Robert Zemeckis' upcoming 3D, performance-capture film *Beowulf* presents even more opportunities. Finding animators who can do both motion capture and effective character performance has been particularly tough, he says.

The hardest job to fill has been for RenderMan shader writers, Szymanski says. Imageworks opened a facility in Northern California to take advantage of the area's tech industry and attract candidates for those positions. PDI/DreamWorks allows animators to work from the site of their choosing.

While hiring for visual effects work still tends to revolve around specific production schedules, Weiss says Imageworks does everything it can to keep teams and artists together. "It doesn't help anyone for your artists to come and go with each project," he says. "More and more artists are looking for a home, they're looking for a studio, some place they can set down some roots and grow with the company."

While the studios all compete for talent, each does have its own style that animators need to consider in deciding where they'd like to work.

For example, Disney is not the place to work if you want to do an animated version of *Die Hard*, says Rivera-Ernster. It is, however, the only major studio planning to go back into 2D animated features with



Horton Hears A Who!
(Fox/Blue Sky)

Coming Attractions: Among the many animated/vfx-driven movies that are creating a healthy job market for recent grads are DreamWorks 3-D *Monsters vs. Aliens*, Universal's *The Tale of Despereaux* (from previous page), Disney's 2D animated *The Princess and the Frog*, Fox/Blue Sky's *Horton Hears a Who* and Paramount's holiday release, *Beowulf*, which features the latest performance capture technology from Sony Imageworks.



Beowulf
(Sony Imageworks)

The Princess and the Frog. That project has brought people with 2D animation skills back into the Disney fold, but most of them also know CG techniques, she says.

Other studios are likely to be more receptive to pushing animated features into new genres that appeal to different audiences.

"Animation is almost treated like its own genre, where in reality it's a technique, and it can be applied to many stories and many styles," says Wedge. "Because of the expense of mounting these event pictures they have to appeal to a broad audience, but it could be that there are stories for smaller audiences that can be told in animation, but that the economic model is not available quite yet."


The coming wave of 3D films also will create opportunities that challenge animators to develop and apply new techniques. "It's going to completely blow apart the idea of how we're telling stories," says Borders. "When you take everything

to this new 3D place, you start looking at your environment in a totally different way. And it's very new and very exciting and it affects every level of the filmmaking."

The opportunities and talent level of entry-level animators also have grown, thanks in large part to technology's ability to increase the amount of animation education and give more people access to the tools of the trade. Studios are taking note and starting their recruitment earlier, with programs that give students the chance to learn directly from the pros.

Weiss says Imageworks consults with select schools on curriculum. "I'm always looking to bring in a certain percentage of artists who are new to the industry," he says. "The level of the students coming out makes that a lot easier." ■

Tom McLean is a Los Angeles-based journalist who specializes in animation, comic books and visual effects. You can read his popular comic-book blog at http://weblogs.variety.com/bags_and_boards.



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"MacGuffin's Night Out" by Joel Foster and Ryan Page
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Waterworld: Pixar's *Ratatouille* showcased the latest sim techniques used to depict water and wet fur on rats.

The Digital Road Ahead

What's in store in the CG animation universe? Our insightful reporter analyzes a few of this year's hot trends.

by Ellen Wolff

A bumper crop of computer-animated features filled 2006, and 2007 is certainly following suit. But the significance isn't just in the number of releases; it's the animation quality too. As we all have seen and grown accustomed to the trend, images keep getting visually richer—the wet rats in Disney/Pixar's *Ratatouille*, the elaborate costumes in PDI/DreamWorks' *Shrek The Third* and Sony Imageworks' virtual camerawork for *Surf's Up*. Studios are dedicating significant resources to developing tools that give artists the means to achieve things we haven't seen before. At the same time, refinements in commodity software—including videogame engines—are spurring independent talents to tackle CG features. Several enabling technologies are moving the medium forward on different fronts.

Simulation Celebration

Especially evident in recent films are advances in the simulation of water, crowds, cloth and fur. *Ratatouille* teems with them, and Pixar's sim techniques make it possible to show rats scurrying in the rain and rafting on torrents of water. Michael Fong, the

supervising technical director on the movie, sees major strides since 2003's underwater adventure *Finding Nemo*. "We had a poor, bastardized version of water simulation for *Nemo* that was branched off of our simulator for cloth and fur. We've brought it more into the mainstream, and now it's a standalone thing. We've also changed the way we create surfaces. We have a simulator that describes where the water particles will be moving, and another program, which makes the surface of the water off of these particles. We wanted more features in our water—more interesting shapes in the splashes. But we didn't want it to come apart like metallic-looking ball bearings. In previous Pixar movies, water might break up into little particles. We tried to make sure that in this movie they stuck together as long as possible!"

Pixar relied on multiple simulators for animating the fluids in *Ratatouille*, and Fong considers the studio's approach "a mixed bag." Every shot using simulation was subsequently hand-tweaked by animators, so nothing was purely procedural. And it probably never will be, he believes. "Directable simulations are the way all the studios want to go. We're already there to

some degree and we keep pushing that. But right now, when water doesn't splash in the right area, we add invisible underwater obstacles to cause it to splash. We're totally faking the surface just so the simulation looks right. It's indirect. We want to be able to say: 'Splashes here.' And with cloth simulation we want to say: 'Wrinkles here, not there.'"

Cloth and hair simulation were also a major focus when PDI/DreamWorks applied its in-house software to create the coiffed, costumed characters in *Shrek The Third*. Co-Director Raman Hui recalls asking, "'Can we have Puss'n'Boots' fur look wet and then pouf out?'" Our team said 'Yes,' but it had to be planned far in advance. Hair simulation remains tricky and time-consuming. It's not so much about what we can do technically—it's whether we can do it within the time allowed."

Hui has been anticipating simulation capabilities ever since he began animating at PDI 18 years ago. "I remember telling my supervisor that I wanted to animate a character taking off its clothing. The supervisor looked at me like I was crazy. Back then it was tough to do anything organic. The *Shrek* movies are still hard to do, but now we can have a character change clothes!"

Crowd Mentality

Shrek The Third, like *Ratatouille* and *Surf's Up*, also reflects the latest in crowd simulation techniques—in scores of scenes. "We know how to do it now, but it's still not easy," admits Hui, who explains how crowd techniques have evolved over the course of the three *Shrek* films. "Now we chain the background characters like they were real characters. The crowds have all the treatments of the main characters in terms of hair and clothing, which we weren't able



Debbie Denise



Larry DeFlorio



Raman Hui



Penguin Power: The team at Sony Animation pushed the envelope with the virtual camerawork and verite-style CG motion in *Surf's Up*.

to do for the first two movies. In *Shrek* they barely could turn their heads. Now they behave like a crowd—you can tell them to turn when they watch *Shrek* walk by. But we still have to animate different animation cycles to link to different reactions, so the crowds don't look mechanical."

Both PDI/DreamWorks and Pixar use in-house software to achieve multiple character animations, but even studios that were founded on proprietary code are trending towards adding commodity tools when it makes sense. Creating crowds for *Ratatouille* was an example, explains Michael Fong. "We used two different crowd simulators. Our in-house simulator was used for the 'milling around' shots. The other was Massive (the A.I.-driven crowd software created at Weta Digital for Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*). At Pixar, we created animation cycles and dropped them into Massive," notes Fong. "We had to modify the software—just as I'm sure Weta does—to fit our pipeline. Then our animators would do fixes after that."

Off-the-shelf crowd-sim programs like Massive have CG moviemakers thinking big—and even independents who don't have big budgets to work with. Lorne Lanning, (who conceived *Oddworld Inhabitants*' videogames) is considering Massive to help create extensive crowds for his CG film-directing debut on *Citizen Siege*. Currently in development at Vanguard Ani-

mation, the movie requires gritty, crowded landscapes—with thousands of characters in 20 percent of the shots. As Lanning points out, "We'll use a game engine that puts audiences in the middle of Massive-like crowds. We'll be treating game engines as 'element creators.' Instead of dealing with elements as layered passes, we'll use game engines to generate crowds. It's a way to get crowds done efficiently on a \$50-million budget. If you're making computer-animated films today and you don't understand how game technology works, you're going to be behind the curve. It's not easy—in fact, it can be a more complicated solution for creating a lower priced, high quality project. But more of the money you have will go on the screen."

Mo Mo-Cap, Capice?

The influence of videogame technology is frequently noted with respect to motion capture, but even a veteran game director like Lanning doesn't see MoCap as a sure-fire shortcut for feature film character animation. "Nothing offers a 100 percent solution. *Citizen Siege* will use motion capture as groundwork for animation, but we'll need tweakability for keyframing on top of it. We're looking at entirely new systems for layered animation that will give us more flexibility."

At the same time, Lanning believes that

the capture techniques used for lip sync in games can be extremely useful in feature film production. "We can lay in 85 percent of the lip sync automatically play the audio file through this technology to make the lips move. We create a library of phonemes and the software is intelligent enough to analyze the voice spectrum and attach the appropriate phonemes. I think it would be nuts to keyframe lip sync for a 90-minute movie like this."

Independents such as Lanning see the cost-effectiveness in capture techniques, but the promise of this technology has also sparked one of the biggest R&D efforts in the industry. Sony Imageworks has been developing performance capture for computer animated features since *The Polar Express* in 2004, and its technique was fundamental in the success of Gil Keanan's 2006 Oscar-nominated pic, *Monster House*.

The newest refinements will be seen in the CG characters in Robert Zemeckis' holiday 07 release, *Beowulf*. As Imageworks' executive Debbie Denise reports, "We've captured incredible nuances in the actors' performances. Performance capture has become set-based. We can capture an actor's face and body simultaneously on set without traditional optical markers. If we're really zoomed in, we can

continued on page 36



**An Anniversary Gift to You:**

To mark our 20th anniversary, we have put together this special commemorative poster featuring many of the favorite animated characters that have graced the pages of our publication through the years. We're sure you can recognize most of these famous stars, but if you need to refresh your memory, visit www.animationmagazine.net to get the i.d. key to this poster.

The Digital Road Ahead

continued from page 33

practically track pores."

Denise, who is Sony's Executive Vice President of production infrastructure, notes that this is a constantly evolving technology, and still presents challenges. "None of this is off-the-shelf, and it's not a simple matter to get data onto a CG character. There's different ways to do it, and pros and cons to each methodology. We're always trying to refine it so that we can get all the data off the actor in a one-to-one ratio to the CG character. But right now the technology isn't quite there, mostly because the human face can move in so many ways that it's difficult for a computer to track and use that data without changing the model. You don't want to go off model because then your characters will look different from shot to shot. But you don't want to reduce the amount of flexibility you have. There's a constant discussion in our technology meetings—do we want to condense the amount of data when it's on the actor in a battery pack, or do we want to have all the data available offline to use later on? It's not a conundrum, but can be like walking through a minefield!"

Free to Roam

Another leading edge technology recently developed for *Surf's Up* was a virtual camera system that enabled ImageWorks to 'photograph' the film's surfing penguins like a documentary filmmaker would. "The camera is always moving, zooming in to find the action," says Denise, who compares the process to motion capturing a camera. "Essentially, you have sensors in the ceiling and you have a camera with performance capture markers on it. In the computer you have a low-res animation file that can play in real time. When you zoom in or out or change lenses, the computer applies that camera movement to the animation. You can lay out lots of shots in a short time."

While development of this system began on *The Polar Express*, a more robust version was used exclusively on *Surf's Up*. "It can play longer scenes—with more characters—in real time," remarks Denise. She thinks the significance of this trend will be that the camerawork in CG features will feel less 'canned.' "Normally you

cameras are set before you start animation, and artists animate to camera. With this technology, you can go back and forth," she adds.

Interactivity is an overarching goal behind all of these tech trends—enabling artists to create more iterations and collaborate more directly. Pixar's Michael Fong imagines the example of a real time set dressing system. "If your system is hooked up so that you're all online at the same time in the same set, it could be really powerful in terms of being more efficient and creative. Eventually, everyone will have real time systems."

Size Matters!

Rapidly improving technology has certainly convinced more and more smaller studios to attempt computer-animated features. A recent example is Rainmaker Animation in Vancouver, Canada, which has begun making *Escape From Planet Earth* for The Weinstein Company. To create this alien adventure, Rainmaker's 150-person team will use Maya, Photoshop, Zbrush and Mental Ray, running on Linux-powered PC's. This scenario wouldn't have been practical just a few years ago.

Rainmaker's production VP Larry DeFlorio credits the modular pipelines that can be configured with today's technology. "We now have greater flexibility to introduce software solutions as needed," he says. The pipeline that Rainmaker is building will even permit the studio to render 'second eye' images for a 3D stereoscopic release of *Escape From Planet Earth*. Projecting CG features on giant 3D screens is yet another trend that's likely to grow in the year to come.

Raman Hui knows something about the challenges of stereoscopy, having supervised the animation in the special-venue film *Shrek 4D*. "It is harder to animate in stereo. A character can look great in flat projection but in 3D, you'll notice it if he's leaning too far forward. And for conventionally projected films we don't have to animate a character's hands if they're behind his back." However, Hui, like other CG veterans, expects that what seems difficult to do now inevitably will become easier as technology improves. He notes, "Eighteen years ago I asked if we could have a character take off its clothes, and I was told 'No way.' So you never know!" ■

Every Character Counts: Background characters had all the elaborate costume, hair and clothing treatments of the main ones in PDI/DreamWorks' *Shrek the Third*.



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Co-creators Christian Jacobs (left) and Scott Schultz

Dancing with the Monsters

Nick Jr.'s new preschool show *Yo Gabba Gabba!* features goofy monsters, catchy songs, psychedelic toons and some very cool indie bands (for the sake of the poor parents). **by Claire Webb**

Nick Jr. turns up the volume on preschool educational programming with a brand-new, magazine format show reminiscent of *Sesame Street*, with hipster musical acts and bright animation. The new Nickelodeon show, from producer WILDBRAIN and co-created by Christian Jacobs and Scott Schultz of The Magic Store, hits the airwaves this month with musically focused entertainment that is sure to turn heads with its interactive and colorful style.

At the start of each episode, an orange-clad host DJ Lance Rock (a.k.a. Lance Robertson) bursts onto the screen, grabs his boom box and says the magic words, "Yo Gabba Gabba!" The screen then transforms with an array of color as friendly monsters—Muno, Foofa, Brobee, Toodee and Plex the robot—emerge from the stereo and entertain their young audience with pop beats and skits. The show incorporates original pop music, dancing, real children, animation and guest appearances from the likes of Elijah Wood, Biz Markie, The Shins and Tony Hawk.

The two men who created the show are as multifaceted as the segments on the show itself. Christian Jacobs and Scott Schultz began their careers in the music industry with their respective bands, The Aquabats and Majestic. Yet they felt compelled to put their lyrical skills to use in a TV show once they had children of their own and started to feel nostalgic for the kinds of '60s and '70s-era shows they watched as children themselves.

"We wanted to develop a show that was appropriate for kids but had a different sensibility as far as music and style that were a little closer to our generation," notes Jacobs. Schultz agrees, "There was a music sensibility I thought was lacking. Christian and I are both in bands so we thought we could provide different kinds of music that was a little more..." Jacobs chimes in, "some would say edgier or more progressive." So the two began writing songs with fellow band mates and formulating the core characters for a show that would facilitate both innovation through artistic freedom and preschool appropriate content.

After a couple years of development, the two posted the trailer on the Internet to test the waters of its popularity, and it immediately caused a viral phenomenon. Charles Rivkin, president and CEO of WILDBRAIN and exec producer for the show, says the popularity makes it one of the first preschool shows to get a viral mass audience, which he says was crucial in gaining network attention. And Schultz and Jacobs agree. "I would like to say it was our diabolical plan to launch it on the Internet and get a direct hit, but we just wanted to see what people thought of it," Jacobs remarks sarcastically. From there it was only a matter of time before Jacobs and Schultz were teamed with WILDBRAIN to assist in production and animation and the show was picked up for the Nick Jr. block.

The creators say the majority of the animation is done in Flash and After Effects, dabbling a bit

in stop motion, simply because they feel that style lends itself to the graphically changing quality of the programming. "I think it's important to keep things coming that are different and fresh. I think it's the right age for it too since preschool is the age of discovery," Jacobs notes. Taking inspiration from Sid and Marty Krofft classics such as *H.R. Pufnstuf* and the more recent *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, the pair decided to ensure a diversity in their content by producing the live-action sections in-house at their base in Orange County, Calif., and including up-and-coming guest animators (in addition to WILDBRAIN's animation production) to create the remaining animation.

"We didn't want them to contribute completely to our vision, meaning we didn't send out storyboards like 'Here is what you have to do.' We would just send out a song and match songs to the animators," says Schultz. And there is no shortage of music either since both creators were involved with essentially all the tunes like the healthy eating jingle "Party in My Tummy" and the inclusion of special guests like Biz Markie teaching beat boxing, among others.

With its bold colors and wacky delivery, the show is definitely a risk that some may not immediately latch onto as their brand of preschool programming. But Jacobs, Schultz and Brown Johnson, exec VP and creative director of Nickelodeon preschool, all express their belief in the success of the project, and Nick Jr.'s nurturing of it, because it's different and innovative entertainment for the usually safe demographic. Johnson proclaims, "It's the weirdest thing I've ever seen on TV, in a good way. Yo Gabba's uniqueness is what makes it fit in to Nick Jr. and it's kids messaging with fantastical musical beats." It will certainly be fun to check back with the preschoolers who grow up watching the show to see how *Yo Gabba Gabba!* distorts their view of reality in a few years! ■

The 20-episode series *Yo Gabba Gabba!* premieres on Nick Jr. on August 20 at 10:30 a.m. (ET/PT). The series will air regularly on Nick Jr. weekdays at 10:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. (ET/PT).



Animax to the Max

L.A.-based studio moves to a new location and expands its client list and Flash-based original content.

Although L.A.-based animation studio Animax Entertainment opened its doors only six years ago, its staff has witnessed the industry go through its share of ups and downs. Founded by Andrew K. Bain and actor/writer/producer Dave Thomas (SCTV), the studio was originally formed to provide Flash service work for TV shows, virtual worlds, and Internet extensions of established brands and toy companies. However, it's now aggressively looking at creating its own original material.

The team at Animax recently wrapped work on two episodes of *Slacker Cats* for ABC Family and six episodes of BET's animated sketch comedy show, *BUFU* along with Film Roman. In addition, the company is working closely with toy giant Ty and creating animated content for its hot new girl dolls called Ty Girlz and the new launch of its phenomenal hit Beanie Babies.

In recent months, the studio has also amped up its staff to 50-plus, opened up a satellite office in Toronto and is planning to move to a 10,000 square foot building in Van

Nuys. As Michael Bellavia, managing director of Animax tells us, "We started off doing service work for broadband content, but in recent times, we've been working on developing our original content, and extended our service work to TV shows and focusing on convergent media—mobile, DTV, DVD, interactive CD-Roms—there are a lot of opportunities for independents out there." He also wants our readers to know that Animax is always on the hunt for good Flash animators. He adds, "We have a history of helping recent graduates get up to speed in Flash."

A few months ago, the team at Animax (led by head of production Tim Jones) took home a Sports Emmy for its eye-popping work on EPSN's broadband series *Off-Mikes*. The studio's handiwork was also featured in Frederator Studio's *The Secret Life of Robots* (their contribution to the award-winning short was the *Dating* segment) which took home the Best Film for the Internet award at the recent Platform Festival in Portland.

"If you look at the huge success of sites like Will Ferrell's *Funnyordie.com* (which debuted

The Landlord short) for example, it's clear that you can create new brands quite quickly and build awareness of properties faster than ever before," adds Bellavia.

Although most of the Animax projects are created in Flash, the studio also has some live-action experience. The shop's animation team mix Flash and After Effects, as well as some off-the-shelf 3D tools to create their projects. For



Michael Bellavia

the time being, the studio's biggest challenge is educating clients about the wonderful world of Flash. "Although Flash is now recognized as a tool set, some people have unrealistic expectations of how much a Flash production should cost," says Bellavia. "In many ways, the cost of a Flash show could be quite comparable to a traditional 2D show. It all depends on how much you want to throw at it. We've planned shows that cost \$200,000 an episode, and worked on ones that cost \$300,000. It's important to build assets that you can use in all the other kinds of media."

Mentioning clients like Disney, AOL, ESPN, HBO, Warner Bros., National Geographic and Sesame Workshop, Bellavia says the last three years have been banner years for the studio. "Each year, we've doubled our business," he claims. "There are so many new doors to knock on."

Bellavia says it's ironic that although CG gets the lion's share of the attention in the media, most of his studio's business is built on 2D animation. "Frankly, 3D is only one to five percent of our business," he adds. "We are a successful company working in 2D. So, we may not be doing *Pinocchio* here, but we take pride in

AOL's *Slammo & Sloshe*



the quality 2D work we deliver here."

So what are some of the things that ruffles his feathers in this so-called Golden Age? "We have come across a lot of animators who are not willing to embrace new tools," says Bellavia. "They look at Flash as a stepchild of classic animation. You have to be able to expand your work horizons. You have to align the demands of the market with what you want in your life." ■

For more info about the company, visit www.animaxinteractive.com.

Animax recently wrapped service work on ABC Family's *Slacker Cats* and AOL's *Slammo & Sloshe* series.





Flash! Ahhhh, Ahhhh!

SCI FI Channel's Newest Hero is a Classic Icon. **by Ryan Ball**

Ever since Alex Raymond's first *Flash Gordon* comic book hit newsstands in 1934, the dashing, young intergalactic hero in tights has been engrained in pop culture. Throughout the years, he has been portrayed in theatrical serials, in television series and on the big screen in his own feature film. He has even been spoofed in an X-rated movie titled *Flesh Gordon*, which is best known for its stop-motion animation creature effects by Jim Danforth and David Allen. Now Flash is back to take on Ming the Merciless once again in a new SCI FI Channel original series debuting in August.

Taking on the role of Flash Gordon this time around is Eric Johnson, who is perhaps best known as Whitney Fordman on The CW's *Smallville*. Love interest Dale Arden is played by Gina Holden (*Aliens* vs.

Predator) and John Ralston brings a completely new twist to Ming. Promos for the new show from RHI Ent. feature Queen's iconic theme song from the 1980 movie, but there are few similarities beyond that. The series is more aligned with the classic '30s serials, in both its light-hearted tone and its modestly budgeted, run-and-gun style of production.

Another thing the show has going for it is exec producer Peter Hume, a

veteran TV writer whose credits include SCI FI's brilliant-but-canceled 2000 series *The Invisible Man*. Hume says the network had a number of writers submit their takes on reviving the Flash property, but most of them were a bit too dark and serious. "The spirit of the show has to be run-and-jump adventure escapism," says Hume, who struck a chord with network execs with his return to the fun, breezy Flash of the comics and serials, which inspired the *Indiana Jones* films.

Those earlier incarnations played heavily on the public's fascination with rocket ships and space travel, but Hume decided to do away with that

element. He explains, "We have no spaceships because you could do that in 1930, but I think it's a little harder to get away with that today, in terms of connecting two worlds. Our conceit is that the father was a physicist doing experiments (based very loosely on real physics) and he opens up a portal that they jump through to go to the other planets."

There are flying vehicles on the plane Mongo, but most of the visual effects work is going into creating the alien planet itself. "The city they've designed is pretty amazing and across the board I've been really impressed with their work," Hume says of the effects crew. "There's some stuff they're

working on right now and I want to see how it comes back. There are some great fly-through-the-city shots in a stinger, which is the thing that Ming's patriot guards drive around. They're kind of like wasps but they're mechanical. Very cool."

The core crew of around 12 in-house artists is led by vfx supervisor Bruce Turner, who previously tackled sci-fi with the hit series *StarGate SG-1*. "We're



building [Ming's] Mason City in 3D so that we can do set extensions and, hopefully, as we get further into the show, do scenes that are entirely shot on green screen with the CG background of the city," Turner tells us. "But basically we're just trying to create opportunities to open the show up and be there in Mason City instead of confining the show to being indoors all the time in constructed sets."

Turner says Hume and fellow exec producer Tom Rowe have been great to work with because they are open to about anything that the effects team wants to propose, which makes the process more fun for everyone involved. In addition to flying vehicles and such sci-fi mainstays as laser-gun battles and force-field effects, the artists had a chance to create some character animation as episode five introduces a flying tribe of people known as the Dactyls, which fans may remember as the hawk men. The 3D animation is being completed mostly with Autodesk's Maya and e-on's Vue, with compositing being done in Adobe After Effects and Combustion.

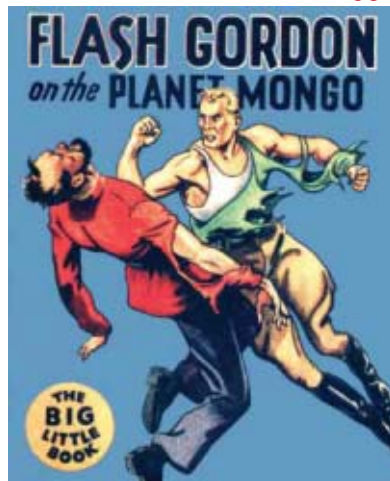
Advances in software have made it easier to deliver good-looking effects at the lower end of the television budget spectrum, but Turner admits that there are limitations and the *Flash* producers are well aware of them. "It only really gets hellish when you have people jumping up and down and demanding something they saw last week in a feature and being unwilling to compromise, but still only having ten bucks," he says. "These guys have a decent grip on reality, so there's none of that going on."

At the time we spoke with Hume and Turner, they were busy at work on the eighth episode (of 22) for this season, which they hope will be the first of many. Getting audiences to tune in is always a tricky proposition, but, as Hume suggests, if anyone can do it, it's *Flash Gordon*. "Something doesn't survive since the early '30s and still have a place in the culture unless it's good." ■

Flash Gordon premieres August 10 on the SCI FI Channel at 9 p.m. EST.



1979



1934

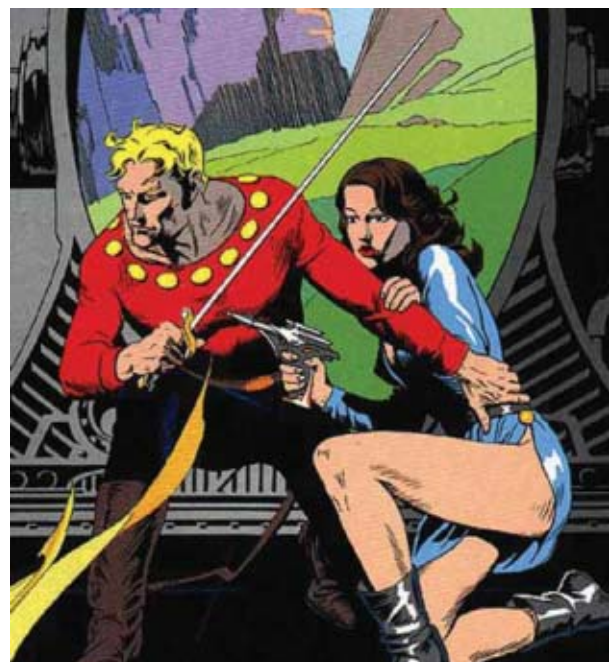


1936



1980

From comic books and theatrical serials to television and big-screen productions, *Flash Gordon* has been a staple of popular culture that has thrilled generations with both live-action and animated adventures. The new SCI FI Channel series draws inspiration from the early incarnations of the saga, while updating it to create a new legion of fans.



The Padded Cel

by Robby London



There's New Hope for Strung-Out Gaming Junkies!

We read in the news that at its recent annual convention, the American Medical Association entertained a proposal to declare "addiction to video games" to be a formal medical syndrome for inclusion in the official AMA diagnostic handbook listing all known diseases and conditions.

Of course those of us who are passionate about animation are no strangers to being called "sick." But...AMA-recognized, textbook-named, rehab-qualifying, medication-prescribed, insurance-listed SICK? Who knew?! Note to Michael Moore: I said "insurance-LISTED," which is not to imply they'd actually pay. So, please don't show up at Padded Cel Headquarters with a bullhorn. It might upset some of the regular stalkers.

Creating a new "brand" always starts with a catchy name. Since the AMA did not propose one for this gaming disease, in the spirit of public service let us offer a few suggestions: "Nin-tendonitus?" "Console-rhea?" Or, our personal pick (albeit probably overly technical), "Gotta-go-Wii-Wii." Medication of choice? What else? X-boxycontin. Okay. In the spirit of even greater public service, we'll move on...

As it turned out, the AMA was not quite ready to take the full plunge. But the group did deem this proposal sufficiently worthy to assign to committee for further study. Maybe it will be the AMA Gamers Group, in which case game producers can relax. Those zombies are so glued to their Playstations they'll never get around to investigating this baseless, bogus claim! (Much less treat their patients who've set-up campsites in their waiting rooms.)

All this got me to thinking: Why stop at video game addiction? Surely there are enough pathologies and diseases unique to the world of animation to justify

a whole new branch of medicine. So, to the AMA, I'd propose the exciting new field of ... **intoonal medicine**. Here are some examples of diseases, conditions and procedures for which one might seek out his or her local intoonist.

Cartoonoscopy: A dreaded invasive screening intended to catch and

writer or director (which is to say over 30) is replaced by a shiny new one deemed "younger, fresher and hipper." The operation is stunningly quick, but often painful. And it's been known to leave long-lasting scars.

Low Blood Cel Count: A chronic syndrome rendering its sufferers anemic, lethargic and unmotivated. It results from regularly having the lifebloodsucked out of your animated creations by unimaginative vampires ... er ... executives. While it's possible to get a transfusion with regime change, the resulting euphoria is typically only short-lived before the condition returns.

Celluloid Surgery: The toon version of plastic surgery. Options include removal of unsightly squash-and-stretch marks, repairing those nasty anvil scars and ... even the occasional "hush-hush" breast enhancement. (Check out the "before" photos of Betty Boop and Jessica Rabbit which circulate on the Internet.)

The best news for us cynical "toon war" veterans is that defining animation-related conditions as diseases serves to *de-stigmatize* us—and create sympathy where once there was antipathy. No longer will we be accused of being bitter, whining babies. Thanks to the AMA, it's not our fault because we're ... SICK! Rejoice! Can handicapped parking placards be far behind?

In the meantime, it has become imperative that I cease writing this installment—immediately! My mouth is getting dry and nausea is setting in. Pulse racing ... delirium tremors ... the facial tick ... the finger twitching....Dammit! GIVE! ME! MY! HALO 3 NOW! ■

Toon industry veteran Robby London will be taking a much-needed vacation this summer at the Jellystone National Park.



Illustration by Mercedes Milligan

remove crappy animation ideas before they develop into full-fledged malignant shows. Ignominy and humiliation notwithstanding, the procedure itself is not so bad because you're sedated. Rather, most say it's the "prep that kills you." (Intoonists would no doubt prescribe this column to facilitate that cleansing process.)

Hip Replacement: A common procedure in which an "older" animation

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SCANDAL ROCKS THE ANIMATION WORLD

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"There is a 4 part presentation on the **Genius of the UPA Studios** and other presentations on **Saul Steinberg and Animation**, **10 Reasons to Love Animation** and **Poetry in Motion**. Then special retrospectives on animators such as **Joanna Quinn**, **Janet Perlman**, **Dušan Vukotić** and **Head Gear Animation**.

And it doesn't stop there - there are also panel discussions, workshops, parties and a picnic - it is unbelievable!"

Rumour has it that executives at the **Television Animation Conference** run around all day on September 19 and 20 pitching and networking and then going wild on the boat cruise.

"Companies recruiting, animation schools, new technology it's all there in abundance. I fear many young animators may be heading into rehab after this one" said another industry source unwilling to be named.

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How to Create a Fantastic Magical Realm on a Budget!

VFX supervisor Peter Chiang lets us in on how he and his team delivered the 820 shots for the new fantasy feature, *Stardust*. **by Ron Magid**

Based on a fantasy by graphic novelist Neil Gaiman, *Stardust* is the story of one Englishman's quest to find a falling star that leads to a cosmic chase through a magical kingdom called Stormhold.

With its cadre of witches, flying sky vessels a la Jules Verne and a heavy sprinkling of magic, *Stardust* was rife with potentially elaborate Lord of the Rings-esque visuals. But director Matthew Vaughn (*Layer Cake*) and visual effects supervisor Peter Chiang (*Pitch Black*, *United 93*) opted for a simpler approach to *Stardust*'s 820 fx shots that proved a triumph of imagination over budget limitations. "You can't compete with the beautiful work of *Harry Potter* or *Narnia*," Chiang admits, "but you don't have to copy them. There's fantastic stuff in those films—brilliant but expensive. This wasn't that sort of film. We created our own view of things and presented our own look and interpretation of style."

Chiang has the ability to read a director, and he knew what Vaughn wanted from the get-go. "I don't know if because Matthew was a producer, it

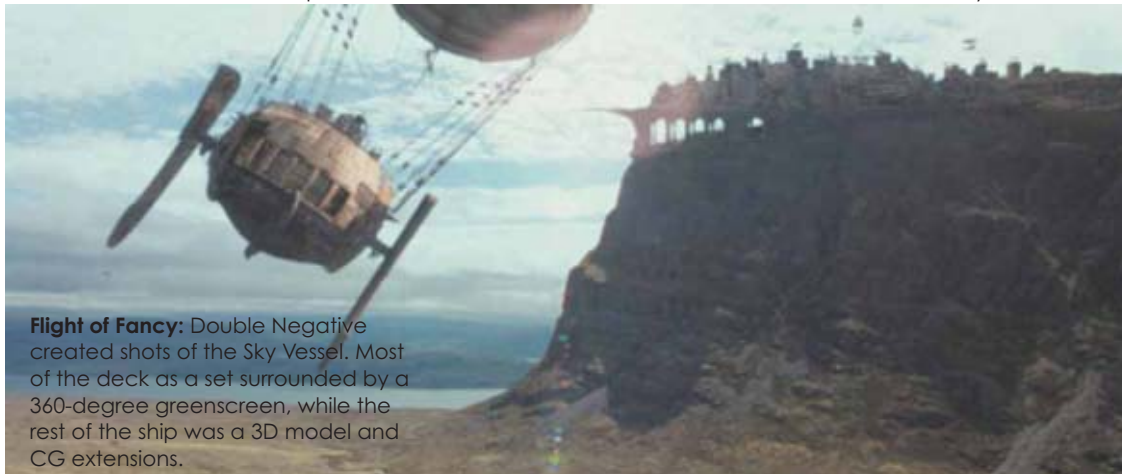
was a hindrance to spend, but he was always thoughtful of money, which he spread out because he could come up with simplistic solutions to carry the story along. What's great about Matthew is when the script said, 'The witch changes Tristan to a mouse,' instead of doing the morphing stuff, he came up with the idea of showing it from a point of view. So we shot it with a normal camera jibbing down with a fish-eye eight-millimeter lens, then we warped it even more in digital and added a layer of smoke and dust around the outside. Then we cut to the wide shot, and she picks up Tristan as the mouse—and it's a real mouse. It's very different from, 'Cut to Tristan, growing whiskers'—the transformation was off camera."

Although he's a co-founder of London's Double Negative, Chiang was able to stretch *Stardust*'s effects budget by farming the work out to six other boutique houses in the Soho area. This is how Chiang breaks it down for us: "Lip Sync, the second main vendor, did the Larnia transformation and all the Yvaine shimmer effects; Cinesite did ghosts; Rushes did Larnia's demise and set ex-

tensions; Baseblack did wire rig removal and a CG two-headed elephant; The Senate did the lightning in the witches' lair and extended The Wall [which separates the real world from Stormhold] from the 100-foot production built out to infinity; Machine did underwater and Larnia comps." He also adds, "All the visual effects companies ended up within one square mile of each other, so Matthew and I would walk to them from about 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Matthew's simplistic approach and understanding of visual effects meant that he would describe ideas very simply; he wasn't led by the technology, he was led by the low-tech narrative, which made for a good meld with the high-end digital technology."

One of the big effects issues for Double Negative was creating shots of the Sky Vessel, commanded by Robert De

Niro's Captain Shakespeare, as it flies over Stormhold. Most of the deck, including the Captain's wheel, was a set surrounded by a 360-degree greenscreen; the rest of the ship was a 3D model and CG extensions plus digital cloud environment. "That way," Chiang says, "we could con-



Flight of Fancy: Double Negative created shots of the Sky Vessel. Most of the deck as a set surrounded by a 360-degree greenscreen, while the rest of the ship was a 3D model and CG extensions.



"If you photograph the set with a high-res camera, there's a more informed texture base. It's speedier to just steal the textures off the set rather than paint them. I guess I come out of the lazy school of visual effects."

—*Stardust* vfx supervisor Peter Chiang

trol the sun direction and the lighting, and we could do big take-overs or start on Mr. De Niro then pull out and shift into full CG as it goes away into the sky environment."

Instead of hand-painting the Sky Vessel CG model to match the set, Chiang emphasized using real photographic textures. "If you photograph the set with a high-res camera, there's a more informed texture base," Chiang says. "It's speedier to just steal the textures off the set rather than paint them. I guess I come out of the lazy school of visual effects."

Many Sky Vessel shots involved elaborate camera moves designed to show audiences various Stormhold environments and the passing of time. "They all had a kind of montage feel to them, big sweeping transformation shots that reveal geography and show things happening in different places at the

same time," Chiang says. "Matthew designed these grand moves where we'd start on Tristan and Victoria at a picnic, then we'd suddenly shoot right up in the air and travel miles and miles over a town to find the King Of Stormhold in bed in his castle."

Vaughn would approach the design and conception of these elaborate shots with typical simplicity. "We'd be at a production meeting, and he'd say, 'We're gonna strap a camera to a jet and fly a hundred miles and land on the castle,'" Chiang says. "Again, from that simplistic way of approaching something we'd get the idea, then expand on it."

Chiang invariably filmed the front and back ends of such shots for real: i.e., Charlie Cox and Sienna Miller picnicking against a bit of wall and a greenscreen and Peter O'Toole in bed on a castle set. "We'd shoot that with a

descender rig, then take a helicopter and shoot day and night plates of trees, which are hard to do in CG. The town we flew over was built in CG using digital terrain maps and texture maps from a survey company of the Isle of Sky and Iceland. Matthew wanted Stormhold to look that barren and desolate, with little vegetation and lots of mountains. Finally, we'd create the exterior of the castle in CG and then join everything up, glue it all together really."

That 15-second shot probably took about three months to finish, but it serves to give audiences a sense of the reality of the geography of the mythical Stormhold. "It was an ambitious movie, but unlike the *Harry Potter* movies, we didn't have endless amounts of money, and a lot of our effects were tailored down to reflect that," Chiang concludes. "Part of it was budget, but part of it was it was just a neat way of showing this world. We were very conscious about the budget, but there's an innocence to the effects that really works for the film." ■

Ron Magid is a Los Angeles-based jour-

Paramount's *Stardust* opens in U.S. theaters on August 10.

Rebuilding Baltimore

Intelligent Creatures Shakes Up *Hairspray*'s Visuals

Hairspray, the musical adaptation of John Water's 1988 movie which inspired a live stage show has now come full circle back to the cinema. To bring director Adam Shankman's vision of Waters' faux-psychedelic '60s Baltimore to the screen required a lot of high-tech digital know-how from lead boutique fx house, Intelligent Creatures, plus R!OT and Pacific Title, with digital color correction/enhancement provided by Efilm.

"When Intelligent Creatures initially heard New Line was bringing *Hairspray* back to the screen, we pushed for it," says CEO Lon Molnar. "My partners and I previously executed vfx work for the musical *Chicago*, and we're jazzed to experience yet another."

One of the show-stopper stage moments was a little number entitled "Welcome to the Sixties," wherein frumpy housewife Edna, played by Bruce Vilanch on stage, gets an extreme makeover. John Travolta plays Edna, the laundress, in the film version, and Shankman's goal was to show the psychedelic world of the 1960s through Edna's eyes. "She was looking like a stay-at-home mom, and now she's looking like a star," says Intelligent Creatures' visual effects supervisor Lev Kolobov (*The Fountain*, *Babel*). "It's so overwhelmingly exciting that as Edna passes these billboards of Dynamite, an all-girl singing group, the posters come alive and the girls are suddenly dancing."

Arguably the most challenging of these involved a poster painted on a brick wall, with the name Dynamite and images of the

three girls graffitied over the uneven surface. After shooting the singers dancing against greenscreen, Intelligent Creatures chose an easy way to blend the 2D images and the textured wall. Rather than do the typical, software-intensive approach to creating such animated artwork, Kolobov and his associates took a truly innovative tack: Photoshop.

Dancing in the Streets: Intelligent Creatures used Photoshop tricks to bring billboard posters of an all-girl singing group to life in *Hairspray*.



But Photoshop only works for a single frame. How then to apply the effect to the animated painting throughout the shot? "We had [to create a plug-in], like an access file, where we could drop images on top of it and it starts converting them automatically," Kolobov says. "In Photoshop, you have the option to do an executable file, and we just dragged that into a folder, and it converted the live-action images automatically into a painted mosaic look. We then comped this back onto an image of a real brick wall we shot. The added

texture on the wall made it look like the graffiti came alive."

Being a new technique, it wasn't completely turnkey. "Because they're moving, different shots reacted differently," Kolobov explains. "When we found problematic frames, we went through a back-and-forth process and did several versions. Say we wanted to work on one of



the singer's heads: We converted the head separate from the body, which had less detail, then we'd combine them together. People think Photoshop can only be used for one thing, but once we found a way to make it executable so we could run a bunch of images through it, we actually got some interesting results."

In the end, Intelligent Creature's Photoshop animation was virtually procedural, proving that it's not how expensive or bleeding edge your software is, so long as the artists use their imagination. ■

—Ron Magid



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Cause & Effects

Crafting New Friends
and Foes for Harry

by Barbara Robertson

It's Harry Potter's fifth year at Hogwarts and everyone's favorite pubescent wizard has once again worked his magic with his fellow students and at the summer box office. Within a week after its release, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth film in Warner Bros' remarkably successful franchise, conjured up more than \$332 in worldwide box-office receipts.

Directed by David Yates, the film, as did J. K. Rowling's book on which it's based, finds Harry battling his nemesis, the evil Lord Voldemort, despite the Ministry of Magic and much of the wizardry world's insistence that Voldemort is no longer a threat.

To create the fantasy world that Harry and his friends inhabit, visual effects supervisor Tim Burke relied primarily on San Francisco-based Industrial Light & Magic, and three London-based studios—Moving Picture Company (MPC), Double Negative and Framestore CFC. In addition, a coven of other effects wizards at Baseblack, Cinesite, Gentle Giant Studios, Rising Sun Pictures and Machine also shared their magic.

"We have more variation in this film," says Burke. "We go to places we haven't seen before. We have extra environments, new creatures and a new character."

This is Burke's fourth Harry Potter film. He joined the franchise as vfx supervisor for Mill Film with the second, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, after winning an Oscar for *Gladiator* in 2001 and supervising effects for *Black Hawk Down*. With the third film, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Burke became overall vfx supervisor and received an Oscar nomination for its visual effects, a first for the franchise.

Return to Hogwarts and Beyond

"The technology has advanced so much in the last seven years, as have people's skills in rendering and lighting, that it's possible and affordable to open up the environments now," says Burke. Early in pre-production, Burke talked with director David Yates and production designer Stuart Craig about stretching the sets into

digital environments.

"Hogwarts was designed in 1999-2000," Burke says. "I wanted to give Stuart the opportunity to expand beyond the stage space, to not be afraid to use digital environments to make them bigger and more magical than he might originally have thought when he started working on the films."

And Craig did exactly that. For the Ministry of Magic's Hall of Prophecies, which appears in several shots, Double Negative created a never-ending room in which millions of glass shelves stretch into infinity in all directions. On each shelf sit millions of crystal spheres on individual ornate stands and inside each, holograms swirl in a plasma gas.

"It's the first time we've shot a whole scene on greenscreen with a view toward making the entire environment digital," says Burke. "We calculated that if we were to build only a small

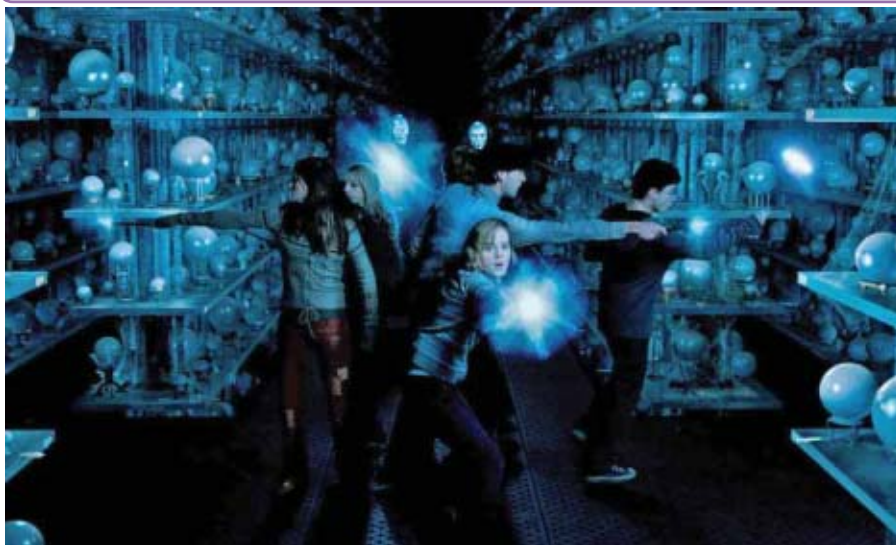


area, say 50 or 60 feet as a practical set, we'd need around 15,000 glass balls."

During a battle scene in the Hall of Prophecies, the shelves topple like dominoes. "They create a crystal wave of destruction," says Paul Franklin, visual effects supervisor at Double Neg-

"It's the first time we've shot a whole scene on greenscreen with a view toward making the entire environment digital. We calculated that if we were to build only a small area, say 50 or 60 feet as a practical set, we'd need around 15,000 glass balls."

—Vfx supervisor Tim Burke on creating the Ministry of Magic's Hall of Prophecies





alive. "We knew render times for this room could be enormous, so we used a single raytracing pass for refractions between shelves and created hold-out mattes for the surfaces to do post lighting effects in Shake."

For a spectacular battle in an atrium, however, the crew used a combination of practical set and digital set extensions: MPC extended the largest set ever built for a Harry Potter film by four or five times.

"Stuart [Craig] let his imagination run wild, creating amazing tunnels with vertical shafts and horizontal shafts," says Burke. "And, MPC, which created some of the most exciting scenes in the film, did the spectacular atrium battle using a combination of animation and effects animation. They amped that for the final battle between Harry [Daniel Radcliffe] and Lord Voldemort [Ralph Fiennes], the two most powerful wizards in the world."

During the atrium battle, the two wizards attack each other by conjuring natural elements—a 60-foot snake generated from fire, as well as water, sand, glass and other elements. In the final battle, MPC turns Voldemort into sand.

Dark Creatures

The fifth Harry Potter book and film has a darker tone than the earlier stories, and the visual effects creature work embraces that edge. "We changed the design of the Dementors from the third film," says Burke. "They're more menac-

When Harry Met Kreacher: According to vfx supervisor Tim Burke, the fifth Harry Potter movie showcases new environments and creatures, such as the majestic half-skeleton, half-dragonlike beasts known as Thestrals (delivered by ILM) and the grumpy house elf Kreacher (courtesy of Framestore).



ing, more physical. They attack Harry in a violent way; throw him against the wall. ILM did a lovely animation job on that."

To create that shot, the effects crew "hung" Radcliffe on a greenscreen stage and then ILM matchimated Harry's neck area. Animators added bulges. For the Dementors, the effects crew used cloth simulation.

ILM also created the Thestrals, the half-skeleton, half-dragon horse-like creatures that Yates wanted to be repulsive yet majestic. "They seemed straightforward, but the skin was very tricky," says Tim Alexander, visual effects supervisor at ILM. "We needed to see the skin sliding on the bones."

In addition, ILM did shots of Azkaban prison on an island in the North Atlantic using CG architecture and digital water using the same technology the studio had used for *Poseidon* and *Pirates*, and flew the Hogwarts students to London on their broomsticks.

For its part, Framestore CFC created a darker version of Dobby, a house elf called a Kreacher, talking envelopes, and a herd of Centaurs in a dark forest. "We wanted to take advantage of Framestore's animation strength," says Burke. "We went back to them for the Centaurs because of the great work they did on the Hippogriff." To create the realistic Centaurs, Framestore CFC also needed to develop new methods for sliding skin, but in the Centaurs' case, it was skin over muscle rather than with ILM's Thestrals, skin over bone.

Other animals appear in the light-filled Petronas effects—a stag created by ILM for one sequence, and multiple magical CG animals created by Double Negative using Maya and Houdini to create trails of light for another sequence. On the darker side, Double Negative also summoned Death Eaters from swirling

clouds of black smoke. And, the studio created the largest creature in the film, the giant Grawp, Hagrid's 16-foot-tall half-brother, who is CG in all 65 shots.

"Double Negative had animated a beautiful little character in the fourth Harry Potter film, a CG spider in a classroom, so we knew they had the skills and quality to create Grawp," says Burke. "It's one thing to animate a creature fantastically, but you also have to make it look real. Double Negative has been developing interesting techniques in capturing facial animation."

The studio used motion capture and high-definition video of actor Tony Maudsley as reference for Grawp, but the final version of the character is keyframed. "To make Grawp look totally convincing, we created a new skin shader, a new hair pipeline, and worked out a way to create high levels of detail in his skin," says Franklin. "He's side by side with live actors in the shots."

Although the world's Muggles are torn these days between watching the fifth Harry Potter book come alive on the screen and reading the seventh, the final book in the series, Burke is now working on the one between, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, scheduled for release in November 2008. "We're doing Quidditch matches again on this one," he says, "and we have to create hundreds of Inferi, creatures of the underworld, as well as complete CG creatures. I want to capture actors on set for the CG creatures and then enhance the performances."

Let the magic continue. ■

Warner Bros.' *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* opened on July 11 in U.S. theaters. At presstime, the film had sold over \$564 million in tickets worldwide.

Digital Magic

by Christopher Grove



On Talking Dogs and New Viewer Habits

While legendary Hollywood producer and studio founder Samuel Goldwyn hated socially conscious movies ("Films are for entertainment, messages should be delivered by Western Union."), he'd have probably approved of Public Service Announcements. They're *meant* to say something redeeming. Often, top directors volunteer their services to make them. It's a relief not to be arguing with the copywriter about line readings, gestures and which way the front door should open in an orange juice spot. Within limits, directors and other members of the creative team can try things in PSAs they're not allowed to do (or discouraged from doing) by nervous ad agencies and their clients. Case in point: a recent spot for Drug-Free America directed by Paul Dektor (son of Leslie) and featuring the work of Los Angeles-based effects and character design house Beau Studio.

In *Dog*, a talking canine delivers a simple message to his teenage owner: "I hate it when you're high." While the perplexed performance of the lead actress sells the conceit, the ad's talking dog delivers the goods. "The project was refreshing for us in its simplicity," says Beau Studio owner/creative director Beau Cameron. His work can be seen in numerous spots and, among others, the feature films *Adaptation*, *Failure to Launch* and *Terminator III*. "Much of what we do as far as animal animation is concerned leans toward comedy or the paranormal," he says. "Here, the character was expressing a very matter-of-fact emotion: disappointment. No punch line, no banter and nothing over the top. It was just real, very grounded and a very clever take on the genre."

Streams of Consumer Consciousness

A new report on consumer use of streaming media would have given television network execs a conniption fit five years ago. But now that the U.S. networks are fully onboard the download and streaming bandwagon, the report contains the sort of numbers

streams), 1.7 billion of which occurred at YouTube.com. Fox Interactive Media ranked second with 680 million streams (8.1%), followed by Yahoo! sites with 387 million (4.6%) and Viacom Digital with 237 million (2.8%). In total, nearly 132 million Americans viewed online streaming video in May. Google Sites also captured the largest streaming video audience with more than 64.9

Pooch Pow-Wow: Culver City-based Beau Studio uses its vfx and character animation expertise to create a talking dog for a recent anti-drug PSA.



that'll give them confidence they're moving in the right direction.

According to comScore, three out of four U.S. Internet users watched more than 2.5 hours of streamed media on average in May 2007. Americans viewed more than 8.3 billion video streams online. Google Sites once again ranked as the top U.S. streaming video property with 1.8 billion videos streamed (a 21.5% share of total

million unique streamers, followed by Fox Interactive Media with 52.7 million and Yahoo! sites with 35 million. Among the rest, ABC.com got an 8 percent share of streamers, Disney 7.7 percent and Major League Baseball's MLB.com 5.5 percent.

At the same time, a Nielsen Company survey conducted for a cable TV trade group says an estimated 81 million people (63 percent of the 129

million people who access the Internet over broadband in the U.S.) watch broadband video at home or at work. The number increased from 70 million in September 2006 to 81 million in March 2007, a jump of 16 percent in just six months.

High Def Surging?

With the sometimes overwhelming array of choices at your local electronics superstore (Mac or PC? 1080i or 720p? Wii or PS3?), one trade group says one choice is becoming clearer for holiday season 2007. At the Entertainment Merchants Association Home Media Expo 2007, the North American HD DVD Promotional Group announced that overall HD DVD hardware sales were up 37 percent from the first quarter of 2007 to the second quarter, and software sales experienced a 20 percent increase in growth. The data is based on reports from the NPD Group and Nielsen NetRatings. During the same time frame, overall Blu-ray hardware sales saw a 27 percent decline in the same period, and Blu-ray software sales were down

5 percent.

On a spec sheet, the differences between the two incompatible formats seem to be a wash: the native resolutions are the same and the audio difference is negligible (if at all). The irritating thing for consumers is that Universal and Weinstein Company video is on HD-DVD, while Sony's, Disney's and Fox's product is on Blu-ray (Warner Bros. and Paramount will release their DVDs capable of playing both). For computer nerds, more irritation: Windows supports HD-DVD, Apple's OSX Blu-ray. Same story for Xbox versus PlayStation 3. The one other big tech difference: HD-DVD's maximum single-layer data capacity is 15GB while Blu-ray's is 25GB.

With consumers still confused about the difference between standard definition and high definition TVs, it's no surprise that their purchasing decisions with respect to the two new DVD formats is being driven largely by price. In general, Blu-ray players are selling for \$100 more than a similar HD DVD player. (LG makes a \$1,200 player that

can play both formats and up-convert SD DVDs.)

"The numbers are clear," brags Ken Graffeo, executive vice president of HD strategic marketing for Universal Studios Home Entertainment and co-president of the HD DVD Promotional Group. "HD DVD is steadily gaining momentum and market share. With HD DVD players now at MSRP prices starting at \$299 and with strong marketing campaigns around new HD DVD titles with web-enabled interactive features, we're continuing to raise the bar for the consumer experience."

Hubris aside, the HD DVD/Blu-ray battle may well prove to be a repeat of the infamous VHS/Beta Max fight of the 1980s. If neither side wants to blink on the software, player manufacturers should show some smarts and make more dual format players available to consumers as soon as possible. ■

Chris Grove is a Los Angeles-based journalist and actor who specializes in visual effects and new media. If you have hot tips for Chris, you can email him at edit@animatonmagazine.net.

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The Red Stick International Animation Festival is now accepting film submissions for the 2008 festival. All materials must be received by Dec. 1, 2007. See the festival Web site, www.redstickfestival.org, for more information and to register submissions.

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LSU

Tech Reviews

by Todd Sheridan Perry



Caligari Truespace 7.5

Caligari Truespace has been around since the beginning of time; i.e., in terms of 3D content development. In fact, Truespace was one of my first 3D programs running on an Amiga ... yes, a Commodore Amiga. When I finally found my way into the visual effects industry, my awareness of Truespace diminished, as my head had to make room for Lightwave, 3Dstudio, PowerAnimator, Softimage, and then, Maya. So, I was happy to find out that its staying power is quite impressive given the competition. In release 7.5 now, Truespace falls into the same development maturity as its more well-known brethren. In this latest release, lots of tools have been added to keep up with the Joneses; character development with rigging and advanced IK, mixing animations between dynamics, keyframe, and motion capture, high-level rendering features like hair, sub-surface scattering, HDRI implementation and integration with VRay (sold separately) and incorporation of scripting languages. Yes, you see an "s" on the end of language—instead of one proprietary language, Caligari allows its userbase to develop with Jscript, Lua, Python and VBScript.

Now, this is truly a way to keep up with current technology, so, you might ask "What is different about Caligari Truespace?" and that's a very legit question. It's doubtful that Truespace will pre-

vent Autodesk from ultimately creating the 3D equivalent of the New World Order. However, Caligari has carved out its own niche in the industry by having its focus on 3D web content, and more specific, a method of live collaboration within a virtual environment on the web. Distributed artists can work on the same assets at the same time in the same 3D space. This truly makes development available to a world community working remotely, and clients can participate in reviewing assets online through the free 3D truePlay application.

For \$595 (with an additional \$299 for Vray) you can get started with an incredibly robust 3D toolset, and you'll be one step ahead of the key players when you are showing off your latest creation to your clients inside a 3D conference room which you've built on your own.

Website: www.caligari.com

Price: \$595

Maxon BodyPaint 3D V. 10

BodyPaint comes to us from the developers of Cinema4D, and it's now in its third generation. Obviously, with new generations comes more maturity and stability ... and new cool features. This handy tool has already established itself with the ability to paint directly on 3D geometry, which isn't a feat unto itself, but you can paint across multiple layers and UV maps. It also combines a renderer with the viewport GL, which provides a pseudo-IPR way of painting. It's similar to painting into the rendered image. New features take these tools and increase the usability while keeping up with the available new technologies.

The paint system has been beefed up with painting in float. For the uninitiated, this refers to the fact that there is a lot more information in the colors than in years past. Working in float is essential to be taken seriously in a production environment these

days. It provides the latitude to push the color correction and processing to the limit downstream in the pipeline without having to worry about the textures falling apart. Trust me when I tell you that this is a good thing.

New UV management technology is incorporated through LSCM Unwrapping, which means Least Squares Conformal



Map, which in regular lingo means that BodyPaint will analyze the geometry and flatten out the UVs using the angle between the polygons as a gauge for how to flatten them out. It essentially creates an atlas of the object—just like the view of the world in your fourth-grade classroom.

Furthermore, BodyPaint allows you to Freeze the 3D view while painting. In the past, the artist was limited to the resolution of the viewport for the projection painting. By freezing the view, you can zoom into that perspective for creating high-level detail in the painting.

Overall, some great new features have been added. The product is well-known in the industry and doesn't have an enormous price tag. BodyPaint 3D offers direct translation plugins for Maya, Softimage XSI, 3ds Max and Lightwave. It could stand for a little revamp in the code to optimize calculations because it'll bog down somewhat—but this is in direct correlation to the density of the mesh and the size of the maps. If you need to paint texture maps, this is certainly one of the better pieces of software on the market.

Website: www.maxon.net

Price: \$895 ■

Todd Sheridan Perry is the co-owner and vfx supervisor of Max Ink Productions. He can be reached at ducky@maxinkcafe.com.



Random Notes

Massive 3.0: A Real Crowd-Pleaser

The rat pack in *Ratatouille*, the armies of thousands in *300*, the herds of animals in *Evan Almighty*, and before that, in 20 other feature films, all animated with Massive, might lead you to believe the software developed by Stephen Regelous originally for *Lord of the Rings*, is crowd simulation software.

"We let people believe it's a crowd system, but really it's been about autonomous animation," says Regelous. "That scares some animators, but the whole point is to empower animators. They create the nuances of the character and then the character performs under their control."

With that in mind, the company is announcing a multitude of new features in Massive 3.0, which they'll introduce at SIGGRAPH. Foremost is a Windows-based version of Massive, FBX support for moving motion and skeletal data to and from 3D software programs, support for subdivision surfaces, dynamic hair and improved dynamics.

"In 2.6, we could render subdivision surfaces, but you couldn't see them in the user interface," says Regelous. "Now, we have interactive viewing. It was a bit tricky to implement, you might have 10,000 characters in a shot and the subdivision surfaces have to look smooth on every one, so we have dif-

ferent levels of smoothing."

Dynamic guide hairs controlled by texture maps and rendered through RenderMan or Massive's GPU-accelerated Velocity puts realistic Massive agents closer to camera. Improved dynamics adds complexity to their performances.

Massive agents typically perform a blend of predetermined snippets of animation created with key-



framed or motion-captured cycles. The agents then modify those performances on the fly. "One character might pick up an object using a snippet of animation," says Regelous. "Then, because the agents can see, it can aim the object toward another character. The animator controls the nuances

of the motion; Massive selects the actions and modifies them for the context. And now, we can have that animated performance drive rigid body dynamics. You get the best of both worlds: the subtlety from the animator and the realism of physics."

For example, one agent might hit another that's walking along. At the point of contact, Massive can switch on the physics without losing the performance. "Before, when the character hit the ground, that was it," Regelous says. "Now, Massive blends back into the animation and the character can stand up again."

Massive 3.0 also includes new features to help people creating crowd simulation: enhanced lanes for directing such agents as cars along specific paths, layer simulations and real-time previsualization.

With layer simulations, animators can create passes for cloth, hair and rigid body simulations, for example, and then run any or all from within the user interface. With realtime previz, Regelous claims that animators can block out a crowd sim as fast as with a particle system.

While most animators use Massive most often for crowds, Regelous believes the software could also help animate hero and midground characters. "The agents can catch eyelines," he says. "It can solve the mid-ground problem." ■

For more info visit www.massivesoftware.com or at Booth No. 1428 at SIGGRAPH this month.

NVIDIA Helps Bring Short to Life

We meet the two slacker stars of animator/director Tim Heath's short film *Plush Life* as they drive to work one morning. Lundo is furry and looks a little like a Muppet. Flint has plastic eyes and wears velveteen with a flame embroidered on his belly. Journey's "Wheel in the Sky" plays on the radio.

"The short is an introduction to the two characters and the world they live in," says Heath, who expects to continue the

story as part of his work as artist in residence in NVIDIA's digital film group. "I think people will be able to relate to the humor."

Heath animated the film in Autodesk's Maya and took advantage of NVIDIA's Gelato 2.2, which releases at SIGGRAPH, for rendering. NVIDIA's Mango plug-in for Maya supports Maya hair, and Gelato 2.2 now includes new shaders for velvet



process. It's great for the product."

For Heath, after a career spent at Square, Electronic Arts and Industrial Light & Magic, the move to NVIDIA provided a chance to create personal work rather than small parts of large projects.

"It took four years to complete my first short film," he says, "because I worked on it at home after work." But that film helped him get this job.

and for Joe Alter's "Shave and a Haircut."

"Creating an internal production environment with Tim as a resident artist helps us make sure we're moving in the right direction," says Dominick Spina, senior product manager at NVIDIA's professional solutions and digital film group. "When Tim was working on these plush characters, we could tweak the shaders to speed the

"A friend I had worked with at Square saw the job posting," he says. "I was coming off *Pirates 2* at ILM and thought it was exactly what I wanted to do. The people at NVIDIA liked the film enough to hire me."

Heath created storyboards and pitched the idea for *Plush Life* to the digital film group in September and started production in late October. A friend who works at nearby Tippett Studio introduced him to the voice actors.

He animated the characters flat shaded, using playblasts in Maya to see the fur, and then rendered them in Gelato using deep shadows. "There are over 1.2 million hairs on Lundo," he says. PipelineFX Qube distributed the rendering job, Heath edited it with Adobe Premiere and composited the film using Nuke, now available from The Foundry.

NVIDIA plans to enter *Plush Life* in various film festivals, but SIGGRAPH attendees can get an early look when the film debuts during the Gelato users group. ■

—Barbara Robertson

To learn more, visit www.nvidia.com or check out the company's Booth (413/513) at SIGGRAPH.



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As technology advances, the role of artist expands, particularly in digital imaging and design. These “new artists”—innovators who embody both aesthetic and virtual forms—work as designers, composers, and technologists in such areas as 3-D modeling, character animation, sound design, special effects, medical imaging, architectural visualization, broadcast design, and video game design. New York University’s School of Continuing and Professional Studies (www.scps.nyu.edu), helps prepare students to pursue opportunities in these fields.

NYU’s digital imaging and design faculty includes working animators, filmmakers, and artists, all adept at marrying theory and real world technique in their teaching. NYU-SCPS’s location in the heart of New York City, a center of digital activity, means students benefit in—and out of—the classroom from proximity to scores of production companies, such as RhinoFX, and Blue Sky Studios.

NYU offers several academic routes. Its M.S. in Digital Imaging and Design program emphasizes digital production tools and techniques in an applied, multidisciplinary curriculum. A view book and gallery of student work can be seen at www.scps.nyu.edu/digital.masters.

For those just wanting to explore the field or working professionals needing skills updates, NYU offers dozens of courses in animation, digital design and technology. Further, NYU has professional certificate programs in Animation, Modeling and Visual Effects Compositing.

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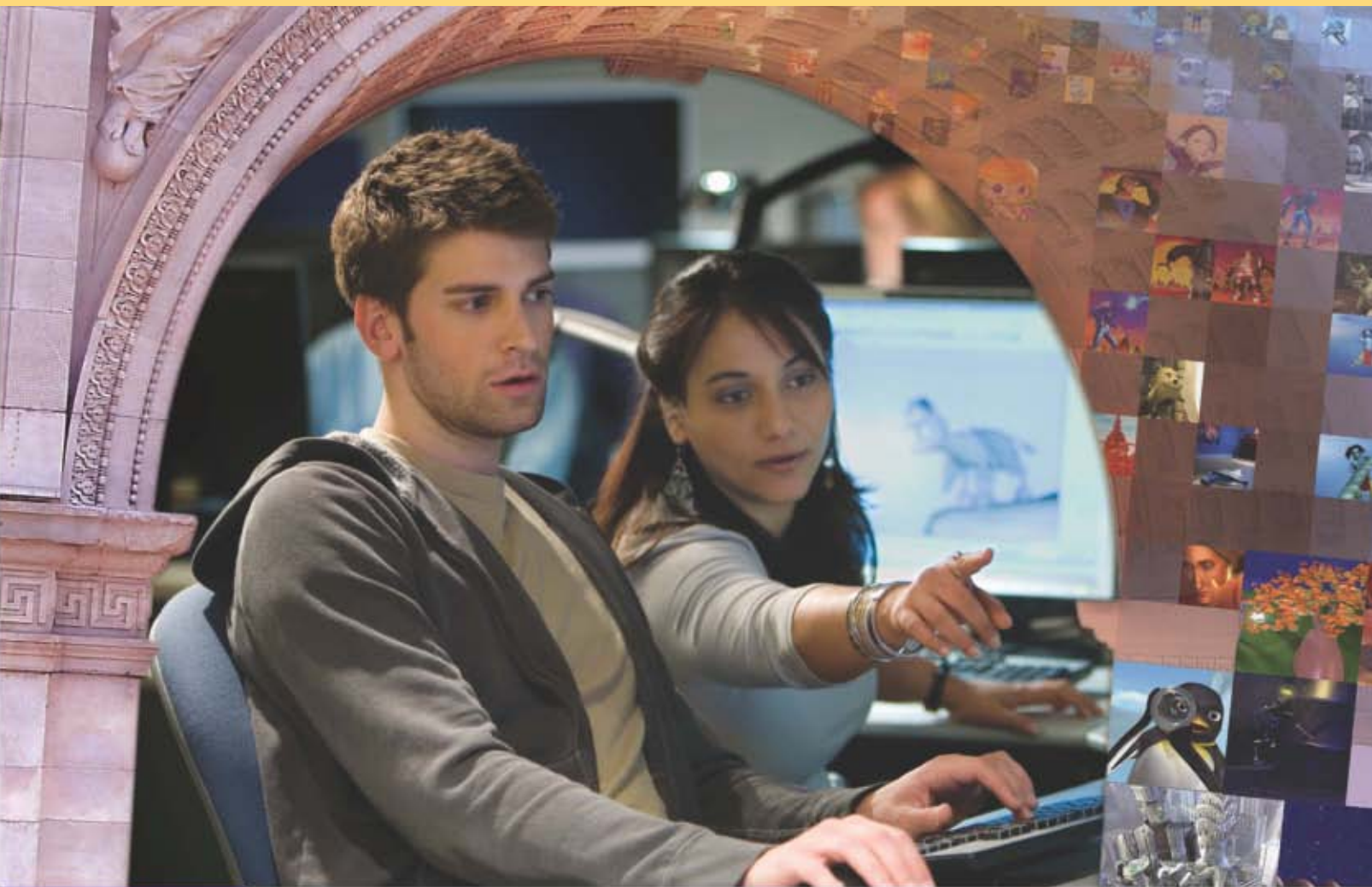
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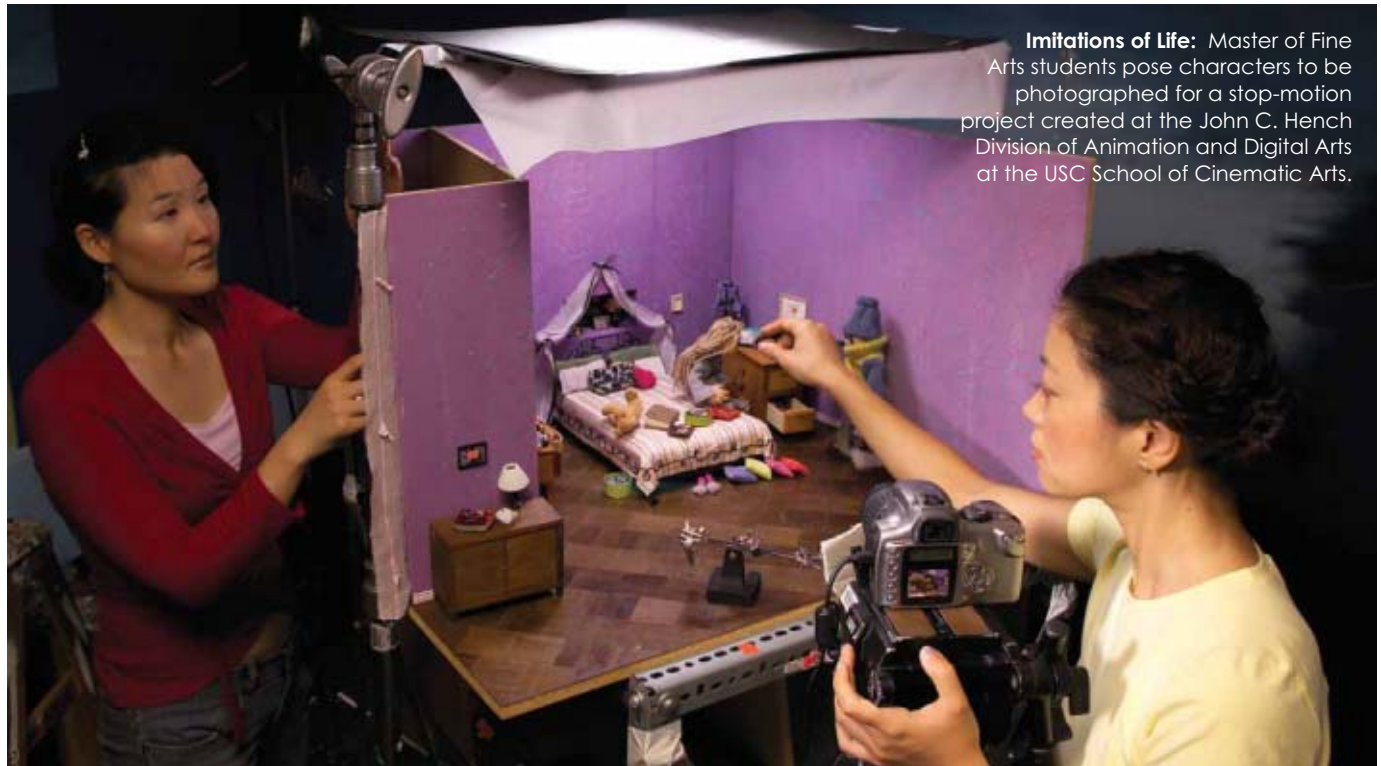
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Imitations of Life: Master of Fine Arts students pose characters to be photographed for a stop-motion project created at the John C. Hench Division of Animation and Digital Arts at the USC School of Cinematic Arts.

SoCal Gets Another Great Toon Program

by Ellen Wolff

The University of Southern California film school has no shortage of educational advantages, thanks to generous support from famed alumni like George Lucas and Robert Zemeckis. And now USC's School of Cinematic Arts has made a notable expansion—a Bachelor's Degree in Animation and Digital Arts.

USC's John C. Hench Division of Animation and Digital Arts (named after the legendary Disney animator) was founded more than 20 years ago, and over the decades Dr. Richard Weinberg has developed the school's computer animation lab. But until now, the only animation degree you could earn at USC's film school was a Master of Fine Arts. Starting in the '07 fall semester, undergraduates can begin studying for a Bachelor of Arts in a four-year degree program that combines a liberal arts curriculum with specialization

in character animation, experimental animation, 3D-CGI, visual effects, scientific visualization or interactive animation.

"There's been a huge demand for a B.A. program for quite a few years," says Kathy Smith, chair of the division. "We were careful to make it a Bachelor of Arts degree—not a Bachelor of Fine Arts—because we wanted students to

complete a foreign language requirement and draw from the breadth and depth of the larger university." She notes that this degree is granted through USC's College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. "It's one of the few B.A.s in animation that's offered in a research university."

The curriculum reflects the perspective of veterans like Smith, who has 23 years experience as an animation artist and researcher. "We looked at the USC catalog and fantasized about what classes we would take. We've included physiology and movement classes so students understand how the body moves." Those choosing to specialize in scientific visualization can take USC's anatomy and biology classes, which Smith believes will enrich their training. "We also have a relationship with USC's Wrigley Institute for Environmental Studies," she adds. "I think scientific visualization will be a very big area for us."

Naturally, given USC's Los Angeles location and reputation, film industry talents have a major influence on this program. Core animation courses are taught by Tom Sito (*The Lion King*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, *Antz*), and its visual effects professor



Vfx legend Ray Harryhausen was one of the many top industry authorities who have participated in USC School of Cinematic Arts' special seminars in previous years.



VFX professor Eric Hanson spends time on Red Rock Canyon on location for his CTAN 463 class.



USC was part of a special Wrigley Science Art collaboration on Catalina island.



is Eric Hanson (*The Fifth Element*, *Cast Away*, *The Day After Tomorrow*). The faculty also includes Paul Demeyer (*The Rugrats Movie*, *Rugrats in Paris*), Daniel Robichaud (*Apollo 13*, *Titanic*) and Maks Naporowski (*Ghost Rider*, *Superman Returns*, *Beowulf*). Playing a leading role in the program is professor Sheila Sofian, whose hybrid animation has won numerous international honors—including an Academy Award for her student work. "We looked for artist-animators with varied backgrounds," says Smith, who thinks the faculty's professional experiences enhance the program's potential. "We've all been in the belly of the whale!"

Diversity will be essential to teach the broad curriculum that's been envisioned—in terms of facilities as well as faculty. This program won't be housed in the state-of-the-art Marsha Lucas Building until the 2008-2009 school year, but students currently have access to traditional animation stands (and an Oxberry camera) and can also shoot stop-motion animation. For CGI work they have an Adobe software suite, web animation tools, motion-capture technology and 3D tools like Autodesk Maya and Softimage. (Softimage expert Thomas Kang, a lead developer of Face Robot software, has also signed on to teach.)

With all of this to offer, it's not surprising that the program's first freshman class filled up quickly. Smith recalls, "We had students waiting at the door. We accepted 22 people in order to get our ideal class of 15. But 18 of those 22 accepted, so that made our kickoff class larger. Fortunately we have the space."

In addition to a freshman class, the program accepted nine transfer students, including Andrew Marshal, who's completed three years in Criti-

cal Studies at USC's film school. Marshal values the training he received in how to break down scripts and edit film, but he's thrilled to be getting his degree in

animation. "I've wanted to do animation since age four, when I realized that animated movies were made by people! I didn't understand how it worked,

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but I knew I wanted to be involved. When I started to think about my college major, animation was the natural thing. Several people recommended going to art school, but I wanted to get a liberal arts education at a university. Yet it didn't seem like an animation major was offered at many universities."

Marshel has studied computer animation and also stop motion, and he interned at PDI/DreamWorks during production of *Shrek The Third*. "Our teachers encourage us to explore whatever medium we want—CG, hand-drawn, claymation, stop motion. But my thesis film will be hand-drawn, and I'm glad people are realizing that medium isn't gone!"

With USC's career contacts on his side, Marshel hopes he'll go from being one of the school's first B.A. recipients into a good job. "There's a huge market for the skills we're learning here. Animation is one of the most prominent art forms of our generation, and I hope that USC's program will open the door for other universities to consider offer-



ing an animation major. Obviously it deserves to be one!" ■

For more info, visit www.usc.edu.

Ellen Wolff is an award-winning journal-

ist who specializes in visual effects and education. If you have school-related news items for her, please email her at edit@animationmagazine.net.

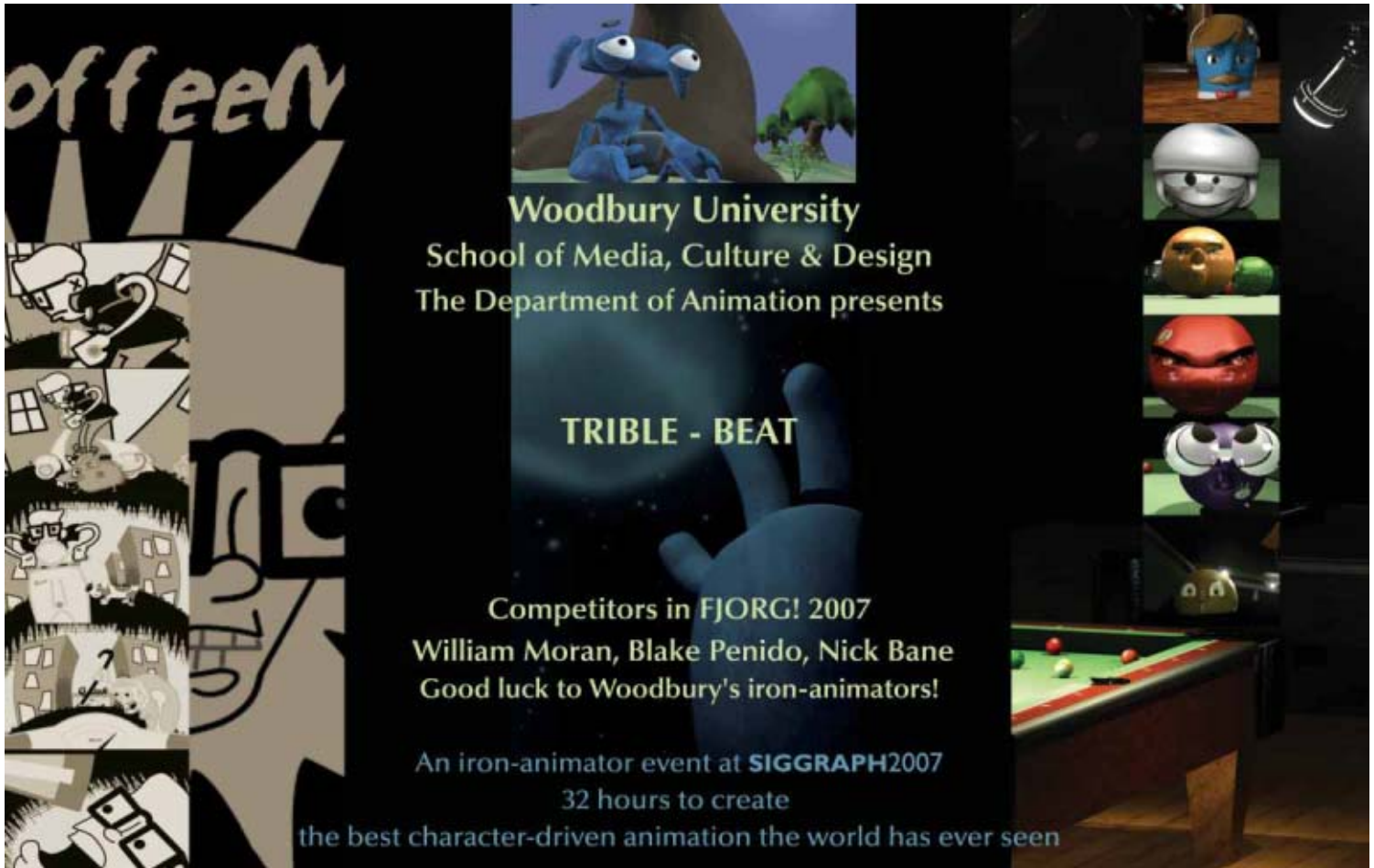
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VES Student work by Asa Gornikui

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Class Acts: 2007 Animation Magazine's Student Short Film Awards

Every year, judging this animation competition gets harder. We are constantly dazzled by the sophistication, technical expertise and excellent combination of storytelling and character design skills with which our student animators are approaching their projects these days. After weeks of screening over 300 shorts from 30 different schools from around the world, we were forced to narrow the field and zero in on one

top winner, one technical overachiever and 10 shorts to make up our winner's circle. These 12 titles were able to win our hearts with their stylistic choices, their sly sense of humor and good old aesthetic excellence. We hope you'll remember the names of this year's winners and keep an eye on their future projects. We have a feeling these talented men and women are bound to impress us over and over again!

First Place: *t.o.m.*

by Tom Brown and Daniel Gray

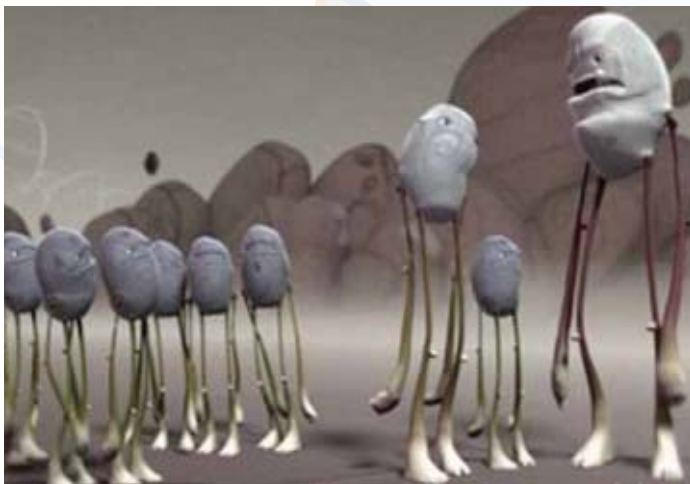
(International Film School of Wales). Try hard as you may, it's impossible not to instantly be won over by this beautifully animated project's simple poetry, the painted backgrounds and the delightful young hero who prefers to go to school in his birthday suit! Not surprisingly, Brown and Gray's graduation short has already won a slew of festival prizes, including the top student award at Annecy. It would be nice if more animators paid as much attention to the art and characters in their projects instead of obsessing about their latest CG tools.



Top Technical Achievement:

Dupleggcated by Bobby Huth

(Ringling School of Art and Design). Although we're still scratching our heads over the title of Huth's awesome short, we're sure about one thing: The CG animation is truly top-notch, and the animator's sneaky sense of humor shines through the storyline: A couple of not-so-scary monsters (reminiscent of that award-winning Ringling short from a couple of years back, *After You*) resolve their conflicts in a most entertaining way in this memorable outing. Hmmm, there must be something in the Ringling water that encourages these smooth CG-animated flights of fancy.



continued on page 64

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Student Awards

continued from page 32

The Winners' Circle: Ten Terrific Toons

(In alphabetic order)

Bare by Andy Lyon (USC). Lyon's entertaining 2D-animated piece takes us back to many of the classic toons from the Golden Age of animation. The animator uses simple pencil drawings to tell the hilarious tale of a little shaving accident that has drastic effects for its lead bear hero. We've all had days like these—and Lyon makes us laugh with his poorly shorn fellow, not at him.

The Boy Who Loved the Rain by Thomas Fraser (Victorian College of Art, Australia). Technology—TV to be precise—takes a young boy's attention away from his first love, rain, in Fraser's traditionally animated black-and-white tone poem, which took us back to the days of Frederic Back's Oscar-winning short *The Man Who Planted Trees*.

Documentary by Lawrence Chung (Vancouver Film School). This is the first of two animated comedies on this list that spoof our favorite nature shows on the Discovery Channel. Chung's soft colors and traditional touch poke gentle fun at the authoritative voice of the narrators of TV docs. A panda, koala and human subject illustrate the difference between the species in Chung's clever ditty, which is the kind of short we like to send our friends at work.

Jose y Maria by Edward Juan (Cal Arts). Traditional animation is alive and well in Juan's mischievous tale about a young girl who takes sweet revenge on a nasty mother superior with help from her ghostly friend (a cross between Lucky Charms and The Great Gazoo). We loved the animator's close attention to background details and top-of-the-line audio assist. On the basis of this short alone, we have a feeling Juan is good enough to make the big time soon.

Naked Branches by Will Kim (Cal Arts). Kim casts a hypnotic spell with his vivid watercolor images depicting a pair of peacock lovers and a sinister snake that connects and separates them. This is the kind of haunting painterly project that you like to keep playing on a loop on a giant high-def TV screen in your living room.



Paper City Architects by Daniel Agdag (Victorian College of Art). Stop-motion dystopias never looked so good. In Agdag's carefully constructed world, a frustrated everyman tries to reason with a nightmarish bureaucracy to no avail. It's the kind of meticulously crafted vision that makes you want to follow the character around long after the short has ended.

Rendez-Vous by Celine Floche (Ecole des Metiers du Cinema d'Animation). A dog and his aging owner spend a day in the park and end up going their separate ways in Floche's energetic piece. Not only does the filmmaker have a lot of fun bringing the dog's movements to life (we were reminded of some of Bill Plympton's best efforts), she knows how to deliver a strong ending—something that was lacking in many of the entries we sat through this year!

Siren's Melody by Lorelay Bove (Cal Arts). Someone please get a copy of Bove's beautifully designed 2D-animated short to Hollywood legend Esther Williams. The star of MGM musicals such as *Neptune's Daughter* that featured her synchronized swimming and diving. We're happy to know that Bove had landed an internship at Pixar this summer. You

can find out more about this hugely talented Spanish-born animator on her personal blog <http://lorelaybove.blogspot.com>.

Taking Notes by Joanna Hepworth (University of West of England). A frustrated composer finds inspiration from a few of his feathered friends in Hepworth's eccentrically drawn 2D-animated project. The lines may not be all smooth and processed, and the toon may be a little bit rough around the edges, but that's why it leaves such a big impression. We have a feeling if Hepworth had given us a slick CG outing about some hip song birds, this one wouldn't have ended up in our winner's circle.

This World by Noel Belknap (Cal Arts). Yes, nature documentaries are very easy to make fun of, but Belknap had the smarts to make his traditionally animated short about unicorns and—we kid you not—cupcakes. You'll have to watch this for yourself to get the delicate relationship between the two "species," but suffice it to say that the animator had a great time bringing the fussy creatures way back down to earth. Incidentally, the Brit narrator of the short is brilliantly cast, and we love the depiction of the overweight unicorns ... it's a great sight gag worthy of *Fantasia*! ■

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Image from "The tragic love story of Dr. Faust" by Jimmie Lee

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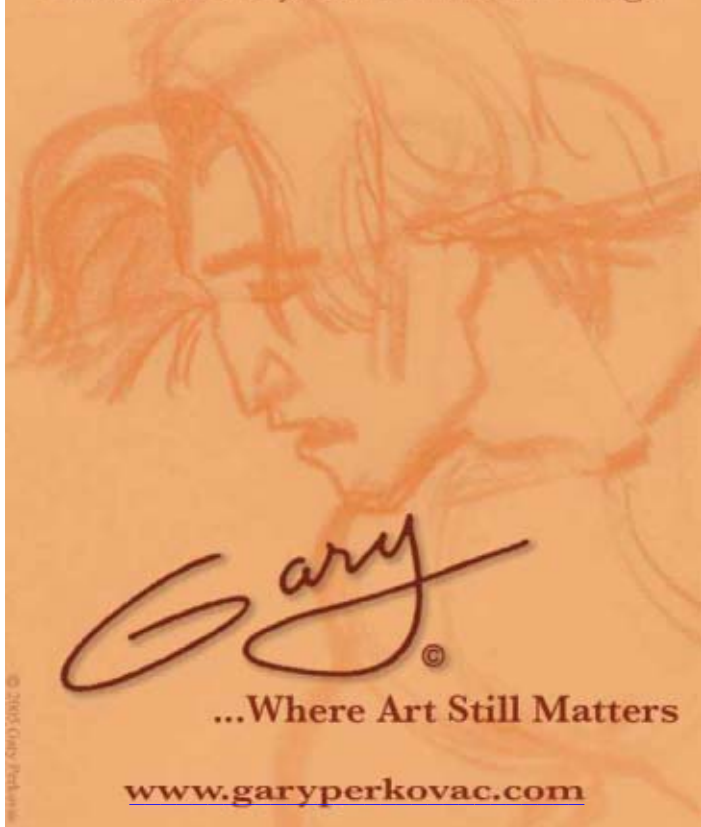
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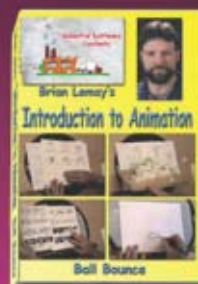
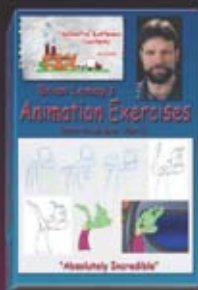
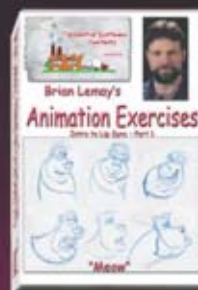
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